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Battlestar GALACTICA 9

EXPERIMENT IN TERRA



ADAPTED FROM TWO OF GALACTICA'S
MOST ACCLAIMED EPISODES!



David Schickler

BY GLEN A. LARSON AND
RON GOULART

A new BATTLESTAR GALACTICA adventure!
EXPERIMENT IN TERRA

When the ruling council of the *Galactica* strips
Adama of his powers of supreme command,
the mighty ship is thrown into chaos.
As if being caught in the middle of an
all-out space war wasn't enough,
Baltar has escaped and is streaking across
the galaxy to his Cylon allies!

SONIC ATTACK

Strange murmuring sounds began coming out of his speaker. A brilliant, glaring light filled the cockpit of his viper. Apollo looked out to his left and saw an immense glowing spacecraft. The noise, like thousands of crystal pendants rattling in a high wind, grew louder and louder. Apollo tried to bring his hands to cover his ears but they wouldn't obey!

He slumped forward...

EXPERIMENT IN TERRA

A new BATTLESTAR GALACTICA adventure!

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Battlestar GALACTICA 9 **EXPERIMENT IN TERRA**

Novel by Glen A. Larson and Ron Goulart
Based on the Universal Television Series

"BATTLESTAR GALACTICA"

Created by Glen A. Larson
Adapted from the episodes

"Experiment in Terra"

Written by Glen A. Larson
and "Baltar's Escape"

Written by Donald Bellisario



BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

BATTLESTAR GALACTICA 9: EXPERIMENT IN TERRA

A Berkley Book / published with
MCA PUBLISHING, a Division of MCA Inc.

PRINTING HISTORY

Berkley edition / February 1984

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For information addresss: MCA PUBLISHING,
a Division of MCA Inc.,
100 Universal City Plaza,
Universal City, California 91608.

ISBN: 0-425-06418-2

A BERKELY BOOK ® TM 757,375
Berkley Books are published by Berkley Publishing
Corporation,
200 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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CHAPTER ONE

Starbuck slouched in his chair, gave a disgruntled chomp on his cigar and observed, "The Council's absolutely goofy."

"I'm inclined to agree with your sentiments, Lieutenant," said the broad-shouldered Commander Adama from behind his wide metallic desk. "Although I'd probably phrase it a bit more diplomatically."

"This is no time for diplomacy. Those halfwits are going to mess up the whole—"

"Take it easy, good buddy," advised Captain Apollo. "Getting all excited isn't going to—"

"Aw, you never get excited about anything." The blond-haired Lieutenant Starbuck pointed his cigar accusingly at where the lean, dark Apollo was seated.

The three men were meeting at Adama's quarters aboard the *Galactica*. Beyond the oval view window showed the chill infinite blackness of space.

Apollo suggested, "Let my dad finish explaining the situation to us. Okay?"

Thrusting his cigar back between his even white teeth, Starbuck said, "I'm all ears."

"I've been meaning to mention that," grinned Apollo.

Adama cleared his throat. "The situation, gentlemen, is this," he said. "The Council, in a not unusual state, is in total opposition to me. Led, I suspect, by Sire Geller, they've told me they wish our recently acquired prisoners to be set free."

"They're out and out goofy," reiterated Starbuck. "Those bozos we rounded up on Paradeen come from Terra. And Terra just might be the planet Earth we're all hunting for."

"I'm well aware of that," the grey-haired commander told him. "If this Terra is the Earth we seek, our long flight across

the universe may have been in vain. We'll have eluded the Cylons only to be faced with an equally oppressive enemy. And a human one at that."

"That's why it's so darn important," said Apollo, leaning forward in his chair, "to question these prisoners from the Alliance."

"We need to know a good deal more about the Alliance of Terra," agreed his father. "And about these Alliance Enforcers you and Starbuck captured and brought home to us." He spread his hands wide, shrugged. "The Council, however, is moving to release all the prisoners and have an unarmed peace envoy return them to their outpost on Luna Seven."

Starbuck popped to his feet, one hand raking through his straw-colored hair. "Commander, these Enforcer gents went out to Paradeen to kill people, to wipe out the survivors of previous Alliance attacks. They're . . . heck, face it . . . they're war criminals."

"Yes, Lieutenant, but the Council doesn't see the situation that way at all," said Commander Adama. "I'm very much afraid they're bent on repeating the mistakes that led to the destruction of our colonies at the hands of the Cylons." He made a fist of his powerful right hand, dropped it to the desk top. "I'm determined that won't happen again, not so long as I'm in command."

"It's going to take the Council a while," Apollo pointed out, "to do anything at all about setting our prisoners loose. Meantime . . ."

"Exactly," said Adama with a grim smile. "Meantime I've ordered the fleet to full alert while we shuttle to the prison ship. I'm going to interrogate our Alliance guests personally."

"Sounds like fun," remarked Starbuck.

The *Galactica* continued its majestic flight through space, a mammoth yet graceful multi-level craft. The greatest fighting ship of the Colonial fleet, the huge battlestar was a self-contained world housing thousands. From out of a docking bay a shuttle flashed, aimed at the nearby prison ship.

Starbuck and Apollo were at the controls.

The commander, sitting in the forward passenger seat, said, "According to Doctor Salik, these Alliance prisoners were born on a planet with an atmospheric density similar to what we're accustomed to."

"Which means," said Apollo, glancing up from his control dash, "they're not natives of Luna Seven."

"Meaning they're probably," put in Starbuck, "from Terra."

"That seems quite likely," said Commander Adama.

"If they are, they must be military screwups."

"Oh, so?" Adama's massive grey eyebrows rose.

"Sure, because back in the colonies the only warriors who got outpost duty off in the space boonies were the ones who'd messed up and stepped on the old man's toes so . . . oops." Starbuck gave a sheepish grin and shifted his cigar to the other side of his mouth. "Guess I shouldn't talk about the old man's toes in front of the old man."

"That's all right," said Adama, smiling. "I know what you mean, Lieutenant. But I think you're wrong."

"So do I," said Apollo. "That destroyer ship they have may not be as advanced as ours, but it's brand new or just about. That kind of equipment doesn't get entrusted to foul-ups."

"That's encouraging news," said Starbuck. "Must mean I'm not the screwup some people say, since I get to pilot such dandy spacecraft."

Adama said, "I'm inclined to believe that these Enforcers are crack warriors, probably equivalent to Academy

graduates such as yourselves. If this Alliance is as oppressive and farflung as it now appears, then their best warriors would be on the frontier."

"Sure," said Apollo. "On the frontier you would need men who can act on their own initiative."

"Well, we're going to find out right quick," said Starbuck as he flipped a toggle on the control dash. "Prison Barge, this is *Galactica* Shuttle requesting landing instructions."

The door of the prison cell hissed open. Commander Adama halted on the threshold, looking into the small grey-walled room and at the tall, thin man who occupied it. "Commandent Leiter," he said quietly in his deep voice, "I am Commander Adama of the Battlestar *Galactica*." He entered the cell, alone, and the heavy door eased shut behind him.

Out in the grey corridor, once the Security Guard had withdrawn to his post a few yards away, Lieutenant Starbuck moseyed up to the spyhole in Leiter's cell door. "I wouldn't want to be locked in the same room with that guy. Especially a dinky room like this one."

"He more than likely feels the same way about you, old buddy," said Captain Apollo.

Inside the cell Leiter, rising and standing stiff and straight, demanded, "I request, Commander, the immediate release of my crew and of our ship. You have absolutely no right to detain us."

"You're in no position to issue demands." Adama strode across the cell and stopped beside one of its two metal chairs. "However, if you'll take a seat and answer a few questions, I would be willing to discuss your eventual release."

"I am not obliged to tell you anything, sir." Leiter ignored the other chair and went over to sit on the edge of his bed.

"It might be to your advantage, though."

Leiter laughed and made a go-ahead gesture with his left hand.

"I'd like to know," began Adama, watching the captive commandant, "why your Eastern Alliance attempted to wipe out just about every human being on the planet Paradeen?"

"Quite simple, Commander," said Leiter, touching at the faint scar on his cheek. "They are Nationalists. We are at war with them."

"What precisely are Nationalists?"

"People, misguided people quite obviously, who wish to change the natural order of things."

"You mean," said the commander, "the natural order as seen by your Alliance?"

"The natural order of the universe simply is." Leiter gave an impatient shake of his head. "It isn't something that can be debated. I'm somewhat surprised, Commander Adama, that a man in your position is ignorant of something so basic."

"Perhaps you could explain it to me," requested Adama, "a bit more fully."

Leiter stroked his sharp chin. "All life forms in the universe fall into two classifications," he began, eyes half closed. "Call them what you will . . . the predator and the prey . . . the intelligent and the ignorant . . . the conquerors and the subjugated. Several terms can be applied to the notion. The point is, Commander, that there are the strong and there are the weak. The Eastern Alliance represents the strong. We were created to rule—to rule all life as far as it extends, and in whatever form it exists, throughout the universe. Quite simply, my dear commander, that is our destiny."

Nodding, Adama said, "And I take it these Nationalists don't exactly agree with your theory."

"It isn't a theory," said Commandent Leiter, a shade impatiently. "It is a law of nature."

"If your Alliance is the strongest in the universe," said Adama evenly, "how do you explain the *Galactica*?"

"Your battlestar, what I've seen of it, is very impressive," admitted Leiter. "However, it is but a single war ship. We will easily take care of it."

"You'll need thousands of destroyers if you intend to engage the *Galactica*."

"We have more than . . ." He paused, smiling thinly. "I've answered quite enough questions, sir. Now I must request that we discuss the release of my crew."

"I think—"

The cell door slid open. "Commander Adama," said the security guard who stood in the opening. "Your presence is requested at the Council, sir."

Frowning, the commander answered, "You may inform the Council that I'll be with them as soon as I conclude this interrogation."

The guard took a very tentative step into the cell. "I'm afraid, sir," he said in a nervous tone, "that the Council has ordered this interrogation terminated."

Starbuck came barging into the cell. "Hey, since when does the Council give orders to the commander?"

"Lieutenant, I just do what they tell me to do."

"Well, buster, I'm telling you to take a hike for yourself before you end up with—"

"Starbuck," said Adama, "that'll do."

"Yeah, but those nitwits can't go—"

"That's enough." He nodded at the guard. "Inform the Council that I'm returning to the *Galactica*." The guard, obviously relieved, withdrew. "We'll continue our talk later, Commandent Leiter."

Leiter clicked his booted heels together and gave a stiff bow. "Perhaps."

Adama stepped out into the corridor and the cell door eased shut.

Apollo said, "You can't let the Council order you around this way, damn it."

"My warrior oath holds me responsible to the Council," he reminded his son.

"That was before the Holocaust," said the angry Apollo. "We've been operating on martial law since then."

"Sure, the fleet's been under your command since we fled the colonies," Starbuck added. "Those Council oafs can't boss you around like some cadet."

"Evidently they don't see things the way we do," Adama said as he started moving along the metal-walled corridor. "Or perhaps something has come up we don't know about. At any rate, it's not something I want to debate while on board a prison barge. Let's head for home."

Apollo and Starbuck glanced at each other, shrugged, and followed him toward the docking bay.

In one of the cells they passed, a man with heavy eyebrows that made a dark slash across his forehead was watching through the small view hole in his cell door. His name was Baltar and right now there was a crooked smile touching his face. "You look troubled, Commander Adama," he muttered to himself. "But whatever it is that's bothering you, it's nothing to what's coming."

CHAPTER TWO

The aircirc system in the prison ship commissary hummed with a low metallic drone. The smells and scents of the food being served swirled in the air and then quickly faded.

Baltar, glancing carefully at the security guards stationed around the long grey room, took his bowl of bluish stew and went weaving his way among the low tables where prisoners from all corners of the universe sat eating their day's-end meal.

At the far side of the dining room he halted before a table at which sat half a dozen men silently eating. They were broad-shouldered, shaggy and low-browed. They paid Baltar not the slightest bit of attention.

"Mind if I join you, Maga?" he asked the man nearest him.

Maga continued spooning stew into his mouth, saying not a word.

After hesitating for several seconds, Baltar seated himself across from Maga. "You're aware of who I am, of course?"

They all went on eating.

Baltar coughed, rubbed his thumb along the handle of his spoon, shifted on the bench. "I am Baltar," he announced quietly. "A very powerful man, ally of the Cylons."

Maga reached for the flavor enhancer cruet. He sprinkled some into his bowl of stew.

"I know who you are," continued Baltar after a moment. "I know, unlike the fools who're serving as your jailers, some of the abilities of men from your particular planet."

Maga glanced up at him for perhaps a second, but said nothing.

Resting both elbows on the table, Baltar said, "I am also aware of what you're planning."

This time Maga looked across at him for at least ten seconds.

After taking a careful look at the nearest guard, Baltar began eating. He had to appear as though he were simply eating his meal. "I know why you haven't tried it yet," he said between mouthfuls. "Yes, you can break out of your cells, but what then? You're not certain where to go or how to avoid being pursued." He took another spoonful of stew. "You don't have enough answers. But I do."

Maga placed his spoon carefully down beside his bowl. "Tell me," he requested. His deep voice was as dry as the crimson sands of his native planet.

"You see those prisoners three tables away?"

"I have heard their leader's name is Leiter. So?"

Nodding, Baltar told him, "They are from an Alliance that, in this part of the universe, is as powerful as my Cylon friends."

Maga said, "Yes?"

"Commandent Leiter and his crew will be, very soon now, transferred to the *Galactica*."

"How do you know?"

"I have . . . um . . . certain sources of information," he replied, smiling smugly. "Now then, Maga. When the shuttle comes for them, we'll make our break."

"We?"

Baltar said, "Yes, that's part of the deal. Without my information, you're helpless."

"Continue," invited Maga in his rumbling voice.

"We take over the shuttle, use it to make our escape."

"And what of the viper ships? Won't they chase us?"

"I know how to handle them," Baltar assured him. "When we reach the Alliance, we'll be treated very well. You see, I

know much that the Alliance will be glad to know. About the *Galactica*, her strengths, her weaknesses. I also know a good deal about Commander Adama." He smiled, head nodding. "Yes, I will be treated royally, as will all who are with me. Do we work together, Maga?"

He said, "Your record to date doesn't inspire great confidence, Baltar. You are, after all, a prisoner on a prison barge."

"Being captured was not my fault. I simply had incompetent followers."

Maga eyed him for a few silent seconds. "We do not intend to be your followers."

"Of course not," he said, head bobbing up and down in a reassuring way. "We are to be comrades, all equals in this."

"Good," Maga told him. "Then we can work with you. You had better be certain nothing goes wrong."

"Nothing will, I assure you."

Maga said, "When the time comes to escape, we will seem to die."

"Yes, I'm aware that you have the ability to feign—"

"We will talk of this again later." Maga returned to his stew.

In a shadowy corner of the vast *Galactica* Council chamber Starbuck leaned toward Apollo to remark, "I don't get these shenanigans at all."

"Hush up, good buddy," the captain advised, "and listen."

"I am listening, but it still doesn't make sense."

"I have a hunch it will shortly."

At the table, with nearly the full Council in attendance, Sire Domra was addressing Commander Adama in surprisingly cordial terms. ". . . The time is long overdue for us to honor you for your brilliant leadership in eluding the

Cylons," he was saying. "You, more than any other individual, are responsible for our survival. And so the Council has decided to honor you with an award equal to your impressive achievement. An honor, I might add, that has not been bestowed on a living colonist in over a millennium." Beaming, he lifted an ornate medal from the top of the table. "Adama, we are proud to give you the Star of Kobol."

All the other Council members rose to their feet, applauding.

Over in the shadows Starbuck jumped up too, applauding vigorously. "About time these nitwits did something sensible," he said. Then he noticed that Apollo was sitting with arms folded. "Hey, what's going on? You don't seem too jolly about the honor they're heaping on your pop."

"Neither does he," said Apollo.

Adama had risen and was holding up his hand for silence. Slowly the applause died, the members sat again.

"I am, it goes without saying, deeply honored," the commander said. "I must, however, refuse."

Domra, his Council robes fluttering, got up. "Surely you can't mean—"

"Sire Domra, I mean what I say," went on Adama. "This is not the time for honors. Our quest is far from over; the danger is still great. I don't know if this Terra is the Earth we seek or not. I do know it is controlled by humans who are as ruthless and oppressive as the Cylons."

Midway along the left side of the table a handsome blonde woman of some forty years said, "I think the vision you offer, Adama, is the dark view of a warrior. It's understandable that you'd feel this way, yet yours is not necessarily the realistic view."

Adama told her, "Siress Tinia, those Eastern Alliance Enforcers are as hostile as any Cylons we have encountered."

"Perhaps," said the woman, "because they were greeted with laser pistols and not—"

"They greeted us with drawn weapons, damn it." Apollo was on his feet now, angry. "They'd already slaughtered—"

"Captain, you are not here to address this Council," warned Domra. "In fact, I have no idea why you and your military cohort are here at all."

"They are here at my orders to report in person on the Eastern Alliance," said Adama, "since the Council seems to have ignored their written report."

"We haven't ignored it, Adama," said Tinia. "We simply don't agree with it. It's a military evaluation, not a civilian one."

Clearing his throat, Domra said, "I might also mention, Commander, that I've met with Commandent Leiter and found him willing to negotiate a peace envoy to Luna Seven."

"Yes, I imagine he was more than willing," said Adama.

"We called this session to honor you," reminded Domra, settling uneasily back into his chair. "Not to argue with you."

"I don't treat you as a fool," Adama told him, "so don't treat me as one, Domra. You are here to retire me."

"That's far from the—"

"Just tell me what other motions were passed in my absence."

"Okay, Commander, you're being blunt, so will I," said Tinia. "We have voted an end to the emergency declared when the Cylons destroyed our colonies. From this centon forward, we are reverting to Council control of the fleet."

Naturally, you'll retain your vote on the Council and command of the *Galactica*."

"I was wrong," muttered Starbuck in his corner. "They're bigger nitwits than ever."

"I had a feeling something like this was in the wind," said Apollo.

At the Council table Siress Tinia said, "From now on, Commander, a civilian member of the Council will assist you. To assure us that our edicts are implemented properly."

Adama asked, "And who is to be my . . . aide?"

She inclined her head toward him, smiling. "I have that honor," she replied.

Lieutenant Starbuck had an extra bounce to his walk, provided by the anger he was feeling. "You should've told them where they could stuff their medal, Commander."

Adama slowed and stopped in the corridor that led away from the Council chamber. "I know what you're feeling, Lieutenant," he said quietly. "But I won't allow that kind of talk in my command."

"But he's right," put in Apollo, anger showing in his voice. "Hobbling you with a civilian aide, that's crazy. Pretty soon they'll go even furth—"

"You two are among the finest warriors we have," cut in Commander Adama. "But you're forgetting your oath. We obey the civil government, no matter what."

Lieutenant Starbuck chomped on the end of his dead cigar for a few seconds. "Sorry, sir," he said finally. "But what do we do now?"

Adama started walking again. "What warriors have always done," he answered. "Our job."

CHAPTER THREE

Some of the prisoners shuffled and slouched as they returned to their cell block from the prison ship mess hall. Commandent Leiter and his men, however, moved in crisp military fashion with shoulders thrown back and heads held high.

Moving along in their wake, surrounded by Maga and his crew of outlaws, Baltar smiled faintly to himself.

From up ahead in the grey corridor a buzzer sounded. The security guard stationed midway up the corridor crossed to the wall communicator and activated the response switch. "Grid Deck Epsilon," he said.

"This is Control," said a voice out of the talkgrid. "The Alliance prisoners are to be moved to the holding grid for transfer. At once."

"Yes, sir." The guard signaled the security man who was herding the prisoners. "They want the Alliance prisoners up on the holding grid right away."

"Damn, they could've told us while we had 'em on Beta Deck," mumbled the man. "Okay. Leiter, you and your buddies hold it right here. The rest of you prisoners, move on into your cells."

Baltar slowed, glancing at Maga.

The shaggy man gave a furtive nod.

The man next to Maga gasped, clutched at his chest and stumbled. He made a growling, moaning noise, arms and legs jerking. Then he fell to the metallic floor and was still.

The guard who'd taken the message tugged out his lasergun. "Back off, the rest of you," he ordered the prisoners. "What the hell's the matter with him?"

"It's the chow," muttered someone down the line. "It'll kill anybody."

The other two guards got their weapons out. "Don't try anything, the rest of you guys," warned one.

Baltar was shaking his head from side to side, staring down at the fallen prisoner. "This man is seriously ill, sir," he told the approaching guard. "I'm afraid he may even be . . . dead."

"I don't need your medical opinions, Baltar. Stand aside."

"Suppose some plague is loose on this barge," said Baltar. "We may all die and I for one—"

"Shut up, back off." The guard jabbed at the air between him and Baltar with his pistol. Then he dropped to one knee beside the sprawled prisoner. "Hell, I can't find a pulse on this guy."

"C'mon," said another of the guards, edging nearer. "There's no reason why—"

"Well, he isn't breathing and there's not a flicker of a pulse."

"It's a plague," said Baltar. "We'll all catch it."

"Plague," muttered someone down at the end of the row of prisoners.

The third guard said, "The rest of you get into Baltar's cell here. We better get in touch with the Med Techs and—"

"Another one!" cried Baltar as Maga himself collapsed to his knees.

Body jerking, the shaggy man tumbled over. He hit the corridor floor with a thump and ceased to breathe.

"Damn, what the devil's going on?" The kneeling guard reached out and felt Maga's wrist. "He's dead, too."

"Okay, okay," said the third guard. "Don't panic, Winship. We'll shoo these prisoners into a cell and then—"

"I'm not going into a cell with all of them," insisted Baltar. "There's a highly contagious disease loose on this damn ship and—"

"Keep quiet," suggested Winship, getting to his feet and pointing his gun at Baltar.

Before the other two guards could begin moving the prisoners clear of the fallen men, another man dropped to the floor.

Winship holstered his gun, spun on his heel and ran for the wall communicator. "I'll get the Meds down here. We're going to need breathing gear, heart stimulators, the whole damn works!"

The other two guards moved closer to the three bodies.

"What could have hit so many of them all at once?" said one of them.

The other was crouching, frowning over Maga's seeming corpse.

All at once Maga's powerful hand swung up, caught the guard's gun hand and wrenched his weapon away from him. "Strike!" he cried.

The other two dead men came back to life and tackled the second guard.

The guard at the communicator reached for his holstered pistol, but before he could tug it out, two prisoners caught him. One kicked him hard in the midsection, sending him against the wall and producing a hollow thunk.

Maga efficiently broke the neck of the guard with whom he'd been struggling. Nodding, he arose with the dead man's gun in his hand.

Baltar glanced around and saw that the other two guards were also dead. "Lord, that was fast," he said.

"Not as fast as it should've been," said Maga in his growling voice. "Captivity has slowed us down."

Colonel Tigh was uneasy. He kept glancing around the bridge of the *Galactica*, eyes moving from Adama in his command chair to Siress Tinia, who hovered behind the chair, and then away again. "Stupid notion," he said under his breath. "Sticking him with a Council nursemaid who simply—"

"Beg pardon, sir?" inquired a female junior officer who was standing nearby. "Were you addressing me?"

"Hm? Oh, no. I was just . . . praying."

"Seems like a good time for it." Smiling faintly, she moved over to a readout panel.

Tinia rested one hand on the back of Commander Adama's chair. "I really think we'll be able to—"

"Commander," barked the communicator in front of Adama. "The Council is requesting a shuttle to transfer prisoners from the prison barge to the *Galactica*."

"Granted," said Adama. He swiveled around in his chair and beckoned to the black colonel. "Colonel Tigh, select four warriors to act as escort."

"Yes, sir," said Tigh, brightening some.

"Just a micron, Colonel, if you would," said Tinia.

Tigh, frowning deeply, came over to them. "I have to get —"

"I don't see any need for a warrior escort," the handsome siress said. "I'd like you to reconsider that order, Adama."

"You don't see the need?" Tigh took a step back. "You want us to bring dangerous prisoners here without so much as—"

"Easy, Tigh," cautioned Adama as he rose out of his chair. "Siress, I can't allow a shuttle to carry prisoners without taking precautions."

"I realize that," she said, "but Council security will be quite sufficient."

"Council security?" Colonel Tigh shook his head. "They couldn't keep a lapdog from escaping off a zoo ship, let alone—"

"Colonel," said Adama, "you're going to give Siress Tinia the impression we're not in a cooperative mood." He smiled briefly. "Very well, Council security will do. Assign Lieutenants Boomer and Sheba as shuttle pilots, Colonel."

After a few seconds Tigh replied, "Very well. Whatever you say, Commander." He turned on his heels and walked off.

"I think you'll realize," said Tinia, "that you've made the wisest decision, Commander."

"We'll see," he answered.

CHAPTER FOUR

Baltar tucked the lasergun into the holster of the gunbelt he'd just strapped on. "Trust me, my friend," he said to Commandent Leiter.

They were in a storeroom of the prison ship. Confiscated weapons were kept here and these weapons were now being reclaimed by Maga and his men and by Leiter's warriors.

The commandent, a slim pistol resting on his palm, stood facing Baltar. "I don't like what I've heard thus far," he told him. "But proceed."

"First we destroy the communications center of this scow," Baltar said, his hand rubbing at the new holster. "Then we take over the landing bay. The shuttle will be arriving at any moment."

"And then?" inquired Leiter.

"Then we make a little trip to the *Galactica*."

Leiter shook his head. "No, that's foolhardy," he said. "We should head for Luna Seven from here."

"We will, my friend," Baltar assured him. "After we settle some debts."

"You have a personal vendetta with those aboard the *Galactica*," said the commandent, dropping the gun into its holster. "But my men and I do not and I don't intend to risk our lives for a cause that has not a thing to do with us. We must return to our homeland."

"I have a more practical reason for what I mean to do," said Baltar, heavy eyebrows almost coming together. "We don't stand a chance of getting beyond the edge of the fleet without being challenged. And the shuttle will not be a match for viper ships."

"I'm not certain I agree with—"

"We have to disable the *Galactica*," said Baltar. "Or at the very least take enough hostages to assure we won't be interfered with."

"I still feel—"

"Maga, you can see the wisdom of what I'm saying, can't you?" Baltar appealed to the shaggy man.

Lumbering closer to them, Maga said, "We'll follow your plan, Baltar," he said. "For now."

Lieutenant Boomer was whistling with his tongue pressed against his teeth. "Wonder how come I get all the picnic assignments these days."

Shaking her head, Lieutenant Sheba said, "It must have something to do with your winning personality."

"You think you're kidding, but I am charming," the black lieutenant assured her as he scanned the controls of the shuttle they were piloting between the battlestar and the prison ship. "I been taking lessons from Starbuck."

Sheba laughed. "You have to have a cigar before you can be as charming as he is."

"I tried that, but the smoke—"

"Ahum," said one of the two Council security guards. He and his slightly pudgy partner were sitting in the shuttle passenger seats behind Boomer and Sheba. "I think I better mention that you two are to stay here in the cockpit when we dock."

"Says who?" inquired Lieutenant Boomer.

"Look, Lieutenant Boomer, it's a Council order."

Boomer frowned. "I was planning on stretching when we got there. And maybe scratching my backside. Do you think that's okay, or shall I contact the Council and get permiss—"

"We know how you feel," said the guard. "But the Council just doesn't want to have any more trouble."

"We didn't have any trouble until the Council started sticking its nose into this," said Boomer.

The slightly pudgy guard said, "You know very well that the last time any of you warriors confronted these Alliance people there was a fracas."

"That fracas," said Sheba, glancing back over her shoulder at the guard, "may have saved your butt."

"That isn't the Council view," said the guard, shifting in his chair.

The other guard cleared his throat again. "Shouldn't you be contacting Approach Control about now, Boomer?"

Snorting, Boomer took his hands completely off the controls. "Who's flying this thing? Me or you guys?"

"Hey!" said the guard as the shuttle began wobbling and then banked steeply to the left.

Boomer crossed his arms.

The shuttle swooped off course, wiggling and shimmying.

"C'mon, Boomer," said the pudgy guard, clutching his seat with one hand and his safety gear with the other. "Quit fooling around."

"We're only doing our job," said the other guard.

"Yeah, that's what they all say," said the black lieutenant. He waited a few seconds longer and then resumed control of the ship.

It leveled out, jerked and got back on course.

"You ought not," suggested the pudgy guard, wiping his perspiring forehead, "to get personally involved in these things, Boomer. I mean, we all have different tasks to perform and sometimes there's going to be a conflict. That —"

"Yeah, yeah," said Lieutenant Boomer, cutting him off.

Smiling, Sheba flipped the talk toggle on the dash. "Prison Barge Approach Control," she said. "Calling Prison Barge Approach Control. *Galactica* Shuttle here, requesting landing instructions."

After a few seconds a voice came out of the speaker. "*Galactica* Shuttle. You are clear to land in Alpha Bay."

"Understood," answered Sheba. "Alpha Bay it is."

Boomer glanced at the dash. "You must really excite that guy, Sheba," he said. "His voice sounds all nervous and excited."

"That's probably because he knows you're at the controls," she said. "They've been watching your approach on their scanners and that'd scare anybody."

"Maybe," said Boomer.

Drumming his fingers on the dash, Boomer said, "They're sure taking their time fetching those damn prisoners."

"Red tape," suggested Sheba.

From the cockpit window you could see across the docking area to the entryway the two Council guards had gone through nearly ten minutes earlier.

"I don't like any of this."

"You're not supposed to have likes or dislikes," said Sheba. "Remember what that guard told us. We all just work here, do what we're told."

"Bull," replied Boomer. "If everybody thought that way, we'd never . . . Ah, finally. Here they come."

A line of Alliance prisoners came marching into view, accompanied by the two security men.

"They look even paler than they were when they left the ship," observed Sheba. "You really shouldn't have made the

shuttle behave that way."

"Everybody ought to have a little excitement in his life."

One of the guards, pale face dotted with sweat, climbed into the cockpit.

Commandent Leiter followed him.

"Hey," warned Boomer, "the prisoners go in the rear compartments. Not up here with—"

"I think you're mistaken," said Leiter, drawing his pistol.

"What the—?" Boomer started to leave his seat.

"Stay where you are, Lieutenant," ordered Leiter. "We need you to pilot this ship and I'd hate to kill you just yet."

Someone else climbed aboard.

Boomer hadn't noticed him before, as he'd been hidden by the other men. "Baltar!"

Smiling, Baltar gave him a mock bow. "So nice to see you again, Lieutenant Boomer," he said. "It's unfortunate Starbuck and Apollo aren't with you or I could settle all my debts at once."

CHAPTER FIVE

Colonel Tigh paced the bridge. "The shuttle should have reported by now."

Stroking his chin, Adama said, "I'm beginning to wonder why we haven't had any word from them since they docked on the prison ship."

"Is this all that unusual?" asked Tinia from her chair next to the commander's. "You both seem to be reacting in a—"

"Contact the prison barge," Commander Adama said into his speakermike.

Five silent seconds went by. Then a voice informed him, "All communications between the battlestar and the prison ship are down."

"You can't reach, them at all?"

"No, sir."

Frowning, the commander glanced at the pacing black colonel. "I don't like this," he said.

From the far side of the bridge a young woman officer said, "Commander, I'm in contact with our shuttle now."

"Good," said Adama, turning to face her. "Is everything all right?"

"Apparently so. Lieutenant Boomer is requesting landing clearance."

After a relieved sigh, Adama said, "Very good. Clear them to Alpha Bay."

"Very good, sir."

Adama nodded at the siress. "I believe that's where the Council is waiting with open arms to greet our . . . um . . . guests."

"That's correct." A faint smile touched her lips.

"Tigh, what's the security status of Landing Bay Alpha?"

Crossing to him, Tigh answered, "There's only Council security personnel there."

"Very well, notify Captain Apollo to take a score of warriors to—"

"Commander," put in Tinia. "Let me remind you that the Council doesn't want warriors present when they greet these Alliance representatives."

"Don't you think, Siress Tinia," said Adama slowly and evenly, "it's odd that all communications with the prison barge are out at the precise centon that we're transferring these people to the *Galactica*?"

"This, certainly, isn't the first time communications have been out between ships?"

"No," admitted the commander, "but—"

"And Lieutenant Boomer just now requested landing clearance."

"That's true," granted Commander Adama. "Even so, I—"

"I think you're both overreacting," she said firmly. "The Council will not allow warriors in that landing bay. I'm sorry."

Tigh moved to the exit. "Commander, if you'll excuse me," he said, striving to keep the anger out of his voice. "My duty period was up over a centare ago. I think I need some air."

"Colonel," Tinia said to him, "if you decide to take your air on the landing bay, or order any warriors there, I'll view it as a direct act of insubordination."

Tigh straightened, seemed to be counting under his breath. Finally he said, "Is it okay if I retire to the Officers' Club?"

"You may go anywhere you wish," she answered. "So long as it's not that landing bay. Understood?"

"Oh, yes," Tigh said. He pivoted on his heel and left the bridge.

Adama steepled his fingers. "Tigh's a good man," he told the siress. "I don't think you really appreciate that."

"I do, Adama," she said. "You're all good men and good warriors. But what we need at the moment are good diplomats."

Starbuck lit his cigar, rested an elbow on the table and let his gaze drift around the Officers' Club area of the *Galactica*. "I am working on a hunch," he said.

"About that silvery blonde across the room?" asked Apollo, tapping his finger on the side of his ambrosia glass.

"Nope, this is a serious hunch," Starbuck said, exhaling smoke. "I get 'em now and then. Like the time I knew that lady space pirate's husband was coming back to their satellite base two days earlier than—"

"See? It does have to do with women."

"The point is, if you'll cease heckling me and attend to what I'm saying, old chum, that I often get hunches of trouble coming."

"So whose husband is on your tail now?"

Removing the cigar from between his teeth, Lieutenant Starbuck used it to point at the captain. "You've been hanging around with too many frivolous folks," he said. "Consequently you're incapable of serious chitchat."

Apollo folded his hands on the table top. "I'm in a deadly serious mood, old buddy. Continue."

"Well, I got a feeling that trouble's brewing," said Starbuck, taking another look around. "It has something to do with bringing those damn Alliance bozos back here."

"It doesn't take extrasensory powers to know that'll mean trouble one way or the other."

"But this feeling tells me . . . Oh, greetings, Colonel. Doing a little slumming?"

Colonel Tigh was standing beside their table. "Mind if I join you guys?"

"No, Colonel," said Starbuck, indicating the empty chair. "Park it."

"Thanks."

The colonel signaled the bar. "Bring me a double of whatever these fellows are having," he called.

Apollo unfolded his hands and eyed the colonel. "You're not a frequenter of this place," he said. "Fact is, we never see you hereabouts unless you've dashed in to drag us away for some mission or other."

"I feel," said Tigh, "in need of a drink."

Starbuck nodded. "I told you strange things were afoot," he said to Apollo. "What's driven you to drink, Colonel Tigh?"

"Well," said the colonel, pausing to take his drink from the bar android. "Thanks. Well, it's that woman, for one thing."

"Siress Tinia?" asked Apollo.

"Her, yes."

"She's sort of attractive," said Apollo. "In fact, she and my father make a handsome couple."

"They may look splendid side by side," said Tigh. "But she's a royal pain in the backside."

"True," agreed Starbuck. "Although she's only doing what that dippy Council tells her to do."

Tigh waved again toward the bar. "Better start mixing me another of these," he ordered.

"You haven't even touched that one yet," pointed out Apollo.

"I will." Tigh picked up the glass and downed nearly all of its contents. "Where was I?"

"Complaining about the Council."

"Well, they've let that damn Tinia woman just about take over," pausing to take his drink from the bar android. "Thanks. Well, it's that woman, for one the Council itself is waiting on Landing Bay Alpha to give those captured Enforcers a cordial welcome aboard."

"We know," said Apollo quietly.

After drinking half of his new drink, Tigh said, "And do you know that all communications with the prison barge went out? Yes, it happened right after our shuttle headed for home."

"Doesn't sound good," said Apollo, sitting up.

"Well, Siress Tinia doesn't think it's anything to be concerned over."

Starbuck asked, "The commander ordered warriors to the bay, didn't he?"

"He tried to, but Tinia overruled him," answered Tigh. "And she practically told me I'd be court-martialed if I took any warriors there on my own."

Starbuck got to his feet. "What say we take a stroll, old chum?"

Apollo got to his feet. "Just what I was thinking."

Tigh asked, "It's not something I've said, is it?"

Shaking his head, Starbuck said, "To be absolutely frank, Colonel, we feel a little uneasy drinking with a senior officer. You can understand."

Tigh smiled as the two men went striding out. "Perfectly," he said.

CHAPTER SIX

The shuttle was cruising toward the *Galactica*.

Stationed behind Boomer and Sheba were two Alliance warriors, both armed.

Baltar was also standing nearby, smiling. "You've done very well so far, Lieutenant Boomer," he said.

"Yeah, thanks. I appreciate your comments."

"There's no need to be bitter," said Baltar, stroking the barrel of his lasergun. "I won, you lost."

"We got a saying, where I hail from, that you ain't won till you pick up the chips, Baltar," said Boomer, hunching slightly in his chair as he guided the shuttle craft to the docking area of the battlestar.

"I admire your false bravado," said Baltar, "but I'm afraid you—"

"Even you aren't crazy enough to think you can get away with this, are you?" said Sheba.

"I've done quite well thus far," reminded Baltar, gesturing at the young woman with his pistol.

"A shuttle's not a battlestar," she told him.

Tapping Boomer on the shoulder with his gunbarrel, Baltar instructed him, "We want a perfectly normal landing, Lieutenant."

"That's what you'll get."

"Yes, I wouldn't want anything to go wrong and cause me to kill you before I have to." He nodded at Boomer's broad back and turned away.

Baltar made his way across the cabin, along a narrow corridor and into the passenger sector of the ship.

"We'll be landing very soon now," he told Commandent Leiter.

Leiter was at a porthole, watching the *Galactica* loom ever larger. "So I see," he said.

"Now, the micron the hatch opens, you and your men will take care of all guards," said Baltar. "Take as many hostages as possible."

Turning to face him, the lean commandent said, "You have nothing to worry about. We are quite experienced in such operations."

"Yes, I'm sure you are," said Baltar, edging over to where the shaggy Maga stood with folded arms. "You and your men, Maga, will follow me to the lift. We'll move directly to the bridge."

Maga nodded. "Once we control the bridge . . ."

"We control the *Galactica*," finished Baltar.

Smoothing his robes, Sire Domra moved in a stately fashion across the landing bay. Several members of the Council were with him. "You guards had best stay to the rear," he instructed the two Council security men who were with them. "We don't want to give them even the faintest cause for uneasiness."

The guards pressed back against one metallic wall.

Domra positioned himself near the entry door the Alliance warriors would be coming through at any moment. "We all must remember," he said to his fellow Council members, "that these visitors have been mistreated by our own warriors. It's only natural to expect them to be somewhat uneasy."

The entry door wooshed open and Commandent Leiter and seven of his men came swiftly through.

"Welcome to . . ." Then Domra noticed that they were all holding weapons. "Why do you—"

"That'll be enough out of you." Leiter prodded the Councilman in his midsection with the barrel of his weapon. "Get against the wall with the others."

Leiter's men had already surrounded the rest of the Council and disarmed the two guards.

"You're making a grave mistake," Domra insisted. "We are your friends and—"

"For now, my friend, I want you and the rest of these idiots to climb aboard that shuttle out there," ordered Leiter, prodding him again.

"But—"

"Get going!" Leiter smashed him across the forehead with the barrel of his gun.

Lieutenant Starbuck said, "My hunch is getting stronger. Something not so good is going to happen."

"Maybe we can prevent that," said Apollo.

The two comrades were moving along a corridor toward the elevator that would take them to Alpha Bay.

"The more I see of diplomacy," observed Starbuck, "the more I think a poke in the nose is a much smarter way of—"

"Violence isn't always the answer either, good buddy," said Apollo.

They rounded a bend in the corridor just as the doors of the elevator whispered open.

Starbuck said, "Yeah, but . . . Holy H. Crow!"

Baltar and several of Maga's men had come lurching out of the elevator cage and into the corridor.

"Hit the deck!" advised Apollo, spinning on his heel and diving back around the bend.

Starbuck's lasergun was in his hand and, as he dashed for cover, he sent a beam flying in the direction of the startled Baltar.

The shaggy men, meantime, were firing sizzling shots in the direction of the two battlestar warriors.

"Looks like the reception committee didn't do too well," said Starbuck as he sent more fire power toward the elevator area.

"We've got to keep these guys pinned down here."

"My sentiments exactly, old chum."

Baltar cried, "Back inside the cage! Quickly, before they destroy us."

"Keep up the barrage," said Apollo, backing for the nearest wall communicator. "I'll get us some reinforcements."

"Inside," said Baltar, herding them back into the elevator. "Now the doors . . . shut the damn doors!"

Grinning, Starbuck edged forward, lasergun firing. "Welcome aboard, Baltar!"

The elevator doors smacked shut.

Tinia sat frowning. "I don't understand why we haven't heard anything from the Council," she said, eyeing the scanner screen in front of her.

"Perhaps they're all still busy shaking hands with our guests," said Commander Adama.

"I know you don't approve of our actions, Adama, but in time you—"

"Bridge!" came Apollo's voice out of a speaker. "This is Captain Apollo."

"What is it?" asked his father. "Go ahead."

"Landing Bay Alpha is under attack," said Apollo. "Extent of forces unknown. Starbuck and I are holding the lift in Beta corridor. We could use a little help."

"At once," said Adama. "Is it the Alliance Enforcers?"

"Could be," answered his son. "But we also have our old pal Baltar to contend with, along with a gang of hairy louts."

"Baltar," said Adama slowly. He broke the connection with the captain, flipped another talkswitch. "Launch Red Squadron. They are to prevent any ship from launching without my approval." He turned on another mike. "Have Fleet security cover all hatches above, below and around Launch Bay Alpha."

"Yes, sir," answered a speakerbox.

"And get Colonel Tigh up to the bridge at once."

Siress Tinia had slumped in her chair. "I don't quite," she said in a shaky voice, "understand what's happened."

Adama rose slowly to his feet. "Your Alliance friends seem to have captured the entire Council and taken over Landing Bay Alpha," he told her. "That's what's happened."

Her breath sighed out. "But surely they understood that we wanted to be friendly—"

"Baltar's a tough fellow to make friends with," said Apollo as he came into the room.

"Yep, not cordial at all," added Starbuck, pausing to brush at a singed patch on his trousers.

Apollo walked to his father's side. "Somehow Baltar and the Alliance gang have joined forces," he explained. "Looks like they recruited a few other ne'er-do-wells from the prison ship as well."

"And they definitely have the Council?"

"That seems likely, yes."

Lieutenant Starbuck rested his backside against a readout screen. "You know, if Colonel Tigh hadn't warned us about what might be coming up, Baltar and his buddies would've been rampaging all over this bridge right now."

Adama asked, "Where is Tigh?"

The colonel came through a far door. "Reporting for duty," he said.

The crackling whine of launching viper ships could be heard now.

"Red Squadron launched, Commander," said one of the speaker boxes.

Siress Tinia was watching Tigh. "Colonel," she said in a quiet voice. "I'm sorry. I apparently made a mistake."

After a few seconds the black colonel said, "Yes, apparently."

The cockpit of the docked shuttle was crowded. Baltar, a satisfied smile spread across his face, was seated in front of the communication screen. "Be quick about it," he was saying. "Put me through to the bridge."

The scanner flickered, then Adama's stern face appeared.

"Ah, my dear Adama," said Baltar with mock concern, "you don't look at all well. Can it be—"

"Baltar, you have exactly one centon to lay down your weapons and surrender."

Baltar laughed. "You apparently don't yet comprehend the situation," he said. "I am in charge of things. I tell you what's to be done."

He motioned to Maga, who dragged the shivering Sire Domra within scanner range.

"Adama, they're attaching solenite charges to the outer hull of this shuttle," he said in an unsteady voice. "They'll

kill us all if you don't do what he says."

Smiling even more broadly, Baltar leaned forward. "Here are your orders, Commander Adama," he said. "Firstly, you are to release the two Cylon pilots who flew me here originally. Along with them you'll turn loose my fighter ship. Further, you will return the Alliance destroyer ship to my comrades."

"Anything more?" asked Adama.

"When my friends and I are all safely aboard our ships, this shuttle will launch. Followed by the destroyer ship and finally my fighter," continued Baltar. "If this shuttle makes any attempt to return before we are in orbit at Luna Seven, or if one single viper pursues us, then I press a button and the shuttle and everyone aboard will be destroyed." He snapped his fingers. "Like that, in an instant."

"And once you reach Luna Seven?"

"The shuttle, of course, will be free to return to you here, Commander."

Adama said, "You don't really think I believe you, Baltar? Or trust you?"

With a shrug, Baltar replied, "You really don't have any choice, old friend. Oh, and if my demands are not met, all of them, within one centare . . . then I'll kill these hostages one by one. You won't enjoy seeing that."

Boomer pulled free of the warrior who was holding him. "He's going to kill us anyway, Commander," he shouted. "Take 'em right now while—"

Maga reached out and hit him, hard, with the side of his hairy hand.

Boomer went slack, dropped to his knees and toppled over onto the metallic floor.

"One centare, Commander," repeated Baltar and broke off the conversation.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Doctor Wilker was shaking his head from side to side as he hurried along the pale green corridor. "I don't know if we can return the Cylons to him at all," he said. Starbuck and Apollo were walking briskly beside him.

"What do you mean?" asked the captain. "We have to have them, to make it look like we're going along with—"

"Captain, give me a chance to explain the situation," the doctor said. "I've deactivated those Cylons who were escorting Baltar when we captured him."

"So reactivate 'em," suggested Starbuck.

Wilker stopped before a hatch, hand on the lever. "It won't be easy, Lieutenant," he said, shaking his head again. "You see, I was hoping to be able to find ways of reprogramming these mechanical men, especially from a long distance, by using coded laser beams, perhaps. For example, I might be able to cancel out their ability to fire on our ships or even instruct them to—"

"We don't have time for a tech lecture," said Starbuck. "We want to reactivate these bozos before Baltar starts killing hostages."

Sighing, the lanky doctor opened the hatch and crossed over into his lab. "Let me show you what I mean, gentlemen."

The two warriors followed him across a long, pale room.

"Holy Mahoney!" said Starbuck, taking his cold cigar from between his teeth and staring down at the work table where the doctor had halted.

The two Cylons were spread out there.

"Jigsaw puzzles," said Apollo, picking up a twist of wire at random. "You took 'em all apart."

Nodding, Wilker said, "Exactly what I've been trying to explain." He gestured at the array of wires, tubes, chips, metal casings and assorted electronic sprawl.

The Cylon heads were still nearly intact. Starbuck hefted one off the table, looked it in the eye. "There's an old spaceman's axiom, doc," he said, "which I just now made up, stating that if you can take an android apart you can also put it back together."

"Put them together in less than a centare?" Doctor Wilker backed off from the table. "I don't think it'll be possible."

"We'll help," offered Starbuck. "I'm handy. You ought to see me make the vidball machine up in the rec lounge pay off in extra—"

"Doctor Wilker," said Apollo, "how far did you get in figuring out how to reprogram these fellows?"

"I still don't think I can do it at a distance," he answered. "Although I now understand the basic structure of the Cylon."

"I wasn't thinking of long distance work," said Apollo, knuckling his chin thoughtfully. "I was wondering if you could maybe change them so they'd do a few things Baltar wasn't expecting."

"It's theoretically possible, I suppose," said Wilker, "but considering the time we have, I—"

"Let's give it a try," urged Apollo.

Adama moved along the row of scanner screens that showed what was going on down in the landing bay that was under siege. "There's the Alliance destroyer being moved into the bay now," he observed. "How much time do we have left?"

"Bit less than a half centare," answered Colonel Tigh.

"What about the Cylon fighter?"

"Already in the bay," said the colonel.

Turning his back on the screens, Adama said, "Is there any way of reaching those charges once the shuttle is launched?"

"None," said Tigh, shaking his head. "There are no space suits in the shuttle."

Siress Tinia had left her chair. "Then we have to assault the bay," she said, "and make damn sure we defuse those charges before the shuttle is launched."

Eyebrows rising, Commander Adama gazed at her. "Did I hear you rightly?" he asked. "You're suggesting we take an aggressive action to—"

"Commander, even though I'm a civilian in your eyes, I'm not stupid," she told him. "We both know that Baltar has no intention of freeing those hostages. He'll either force them to land on Luna Seven or kill them once he's free."

"Yes, that's what I believe he'll do," agreed the commander.

"Then the only real question is," she said, "when to attack and how to insure the maximum success."

Still a bit surprised, Adama said, "We have to hit them while they're transferring from the shuttle to their ships. They'll be in the open and our people will be in the shuttle."

"Agreed," said Tinia.

Turning again toward the colonel, Commander Adama asked, "Is everyone in position?"

Tigh indicated another row of scanner screens. "As you see, sir, the assault teams are ready to hit the landing bay from three sides at once."

Adama stroked his chin. "What do our demolition experts think?"

"They feel they ought to be able to completely disarm those charges in thirty microns or less," replied Tigh. "Once they reach them, that is."

Siress Tinia brushed her hair back from her forehead. "What are the odds of them accomplishing that before Baltar can set off the charges?"

Tigh rubbed his fingertips across the palm of his other hand. "It's going to depend on how stunned he is by our attack," he said. "He'll be busy taking cover himself and he won't want to get caught in the explosions. So if—"

"Do you have a computer estimate of the odds?" asked Adama.

"Computer estimates seventy-thirty, in Baltar's favor," said the colonel. "And I think it's being a shade optimistic."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Baltar rubbed his hands nervously together, watching two of Commandent Leiter's men attach the last of the explosive charges to the hull of the shuttle. The captive craft was ringed with Alliance warriors, armed and watchful.

Leiter said, "The charges are all in place, my friend."

Nodding toward a launch area, Baltar said, "And your destroyer is ready to depart. Things are going very well."

"Are they?" croaked Maga. "Your brilliant scheme to take over the entire battlestar failed."

"That was a setback, yes," admitted Baltar. "But we have everything else we demanded. Our ships are already here and I'm sure they'll be delivering my Cylon pilots at any minute."

Stroking the scar on his cheek, Leiter said, "I'm amazed at the sentimentality of a man like Commander Adama. Letting us all go free merely to save a few worthless hostages."

"He won't let us go free," said Maga.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Baltar. "Adama has to; he has no choice."

"Are you that big a fool?" said Maga.

"What do you—"

"Adama will surely attack us when we move to our own ships," continued Maga in his rumbling voice. "Once the shuttle is unguarded, they'll make their move."

Leiter said, "That's what I'd do, but . . ."

"You don't understand how a man like Adama thinks," said Baltar. "He simply won't risk the slaughter of these hostages."

"He must know you have no intention of letting them go," said Maga, with a raspy chuckle. "And if he knows that, then he's not risking anything by attacking us."

"But I intend to let them go free," insisted Baltar. "Once we're safely away from here."

"Whether you intend to or not isn't the problem," said the commandent. "Our escape depends on whether Adama believes you."

"If he doesn't," said Maga, "then we'll probably all die here."

"No," said Baltar, running his tongue over his dry lips, "he'll believe me."

Apollo finished explaining things to his father. "It'll work," he concluded, sitting down on the edge of a chair. "The thing is, Doctor Wilker can't get those damn Cylons ready before the deadline."

"Then we'll have to get Baltar to give us more time." Adama glanced at the nearest timescreen.

"Yep, that's why I hopped up here to the bridge."

Tinia asked him, "Are you certain the Cylons can be augmented to—"

"Look, Siress, nothing's absolutely sure," said Apollo, glancing at the timescreen. "But with this we have a pretty good chance."

"Let's see if we can stall Baltar." The commander flipped a talkswitch.

Baltar looked around at the Council members and other hostages in the rear compartment of the shuttle. He ran his tongue over his lips. "I want you all to understand," he said, a faintly pleading tone in his voice, "that I mean you no

harm. The moment I am safely on Luna Seven, you'll all be free to return."

Sire Domra's Council robe was torn and smeared with dirt. Clearing his throat, he said, "Yes, yes, we . . . um . . . believe you."

"You may have to convince Adama of that," said Baltar. "Because I fear he—"

"Baltar!" called Maga from up in the ship's cockpit.

"Excuse me," Baltar said to the hostages. "And keep in mind that no harm will come to you."

He turned and made his way along the corridor to the nose of the shuttle.

Boomer and Sheba were up there, watched over by two of Leiter's men. Boomer was crouched against the wall, massaging his neck where Maga had struck him.

"What is it?" Baltar asked the shaggy man.

Maga pointed at the dash scanner screen. "See for yourself."

Commander Adama's stern face showed on the screen. Licking his lips again, Baltar sat down in front of the screen. "About these hostages—"

"We need more time," said the commander.

"What?"

"We need at least another centare before we—"

"Why? So you can work out more plans to attack me?"

"It has to do with your Cylons," explained Adama. "They had been deactivated and we are having problems reactivating them in time."

"I don't believe you. You're stalling, moving in warriors to attack me."

"That's not the case," Adama assured him. "It's simply that we need more time to meet your demands."

"No," said Baltar. "I won't back down."

"Listen to me, Baltar. Take me as a hostage, in exchange for one more centare."

Baltar leaned back, looked up at Leiter and then at Maga. "Well?"

"Accept," advised Maga. "Take him."

"If we have Adama," whispered Leiter, "they won't dare attack us."

"Yes," said Baltar, nodding. Facing the scanner screen once again, he said, "Very well, Commander. One more centare, in exchange for you."

CHAPTER NINE

Starbuck remembered his cigar. Lighting the thing, he said, "Well, we've done it."

Apollo was slowly circling the two standing Cylons. "What do you mean *we*, old buddy? All you did was drop things."

"Sour grapes," said the puffing lieutenant. "Why, with these very fingers I wrought electronic miracles that few others could even—"

"Rot is right," agreed Apollo.

"Gentlemen," said the lean Doctor Wilker, "if I might run the final tests on our reactivated guests."

The two mechanical men were completely assembled, standing in the center of the lab side by side. The overhead lights made their metallic bodies and conical heads glitter.

Wilker moved to a position facing the two silent Cylons. "Do you know me?" he asked.

"Yes," replied one.

"Yes," replied the other.

"Who am I?"

"Doctor Wilker of the Battlestar *Galactica*," they answered in turn.

"Very good," said the doctor, taking a few steps closer. "Now tell me whose orders you obey."

Starbuck held his cigar between his thumb and forefinger, watching the two Cylons anxiously.

"We obey you," said one Cylon.

"You are our master," said the other.

Smiling, Wilker said, "Very well. Now let me tell you what you're to do once you're back inside your fighter ship."

The corridor was thick with armed warriors.

Commander Adama, flanked by Tigh and Tinia, walked purposefully along toward the entry way to the besieged bay. "As soon as the Cylons arrive in there," he was saying to the colonel, "Baltar and the others should move out of the shuttle and to their ships. That's when I'll try to contact you over the scanner."

"Risky," said Tigh.

"No one ever said it wasn't. If everything goes the way Apollo and Doctor Wilker think it will, then we'll be able to save all the hostages."

"And lose the Alliance warriors," said the colonel.

"This is the safest way to do it," said Adama.

"I know. It's just that . . ." He shrugged.

"You two stop here. I'll go the rest of the way alone," Adama said as he neared the doorway.

"There's something I forgot to mention while we were on the bridge," said Tinia. "I'm going with you, Adama."

"No, that's too dangerous. A good many things can go wrong and—"

"Don't argue with me," she cut in. "Baltar may not even let you on board the shuttle. But I'm merely another member of the Council. He'll almost certainly toss me in with the others and I'll be able to fill them in on your plan. Otherwise, they might do something to foul it up."

"No, it's far too—"

"I've no more time to discuss it." She moved off, walking through the doorway to the bay.

Adama shook his head and followed her.

Baltar bowed, smiling smugly, and then pointed toward the passway leading into the rear compartment of the captive

shuttle. "So nice of you and the charming lady to join us, Commander," he said. "Now if you'll be obliging and join the others."

"I'm assuming you haven't harmed the other hostages," Adama said, nodding toward the injured Lieutenant Boomer.

"He's not seriously hurt," Baltar assured him. "And perhaps his experiences will teach him not to be so impetuous next time."

"I'd like to teach you a little something," muttered Boomer.

Gesturing again at the passway, Baltar urged, "Move along, if you will."

The commander took Tinia's arm and they walked into the compartment where the hostages were.

"You see, dear friend," said Baltar when they were among the Council prisoners, "a few of them are a bit worse for wear, but no serious harm has been done them."

"Adama," exclaimed the bedraggled Domra, "why are you and Tinia in—"

"I'll explain," promised Commander Adama, "shortly."

"Ah, forgive me for not informing you earlier," said Baltar as he backed toward the exit. "Your noble commander has offered himself as a hostage, to buy more time."

"Admirable," said the sire, "yet I fail to—"

"Let me remind you all," cut in the still smiling Baltar, "that if my Cylons are not delivered to me very soon, all of you shall die." Bowing, he left them.

Sire Domra moved nearer the commander. "I still don't understand why—"

"Hush up," advised Tinia, "and give him the opportunity to explain."

Commandent Leiter narrowed his eyes. "At last," he said, pointing out from the open doorway, "they're bringing your precious Cylons, Baltar."

Joining him at the open shuttle hatchway, Baltar said, "You see, they're giving in to us on every count."

Pivoting on his booted heel, Leiter addressed his men in the cockpit. "We'll now join the rest of our Enforcers in our destroyer. Maga, have your men cover this shuttle from the outside until we're aboard and then join us."

"Understood," croaked the shaggy man.

Baltar, crouching in the hatchway, called out to the mechanical men, "Wait there, I'll be with you in a moment."

He hastened to the control dash, grabbing the small remote control detonating device that had been resting there.

Then he hurried into the prisoners' compartment. Holding the detonator high, he said, "I'm leaving you now, dear friends. Commandent Leiter's ship is set to launch first. Then this shuttle, which has been set on automatic control, will follow. I'll bring up the rear in my fighter ship with . . . By the way, thank you so much for returning my Cylons to me, Adama."

Returning the mock bow, the commander replied, "Think nothing of it."

"You'll be left here unguarded for a few moments," said Baltar, the detonator still held high. "Let me remind you, though, that if you make a single wrong move, I'll use this handy little gadget to begin setting off the explosive charges. They're rigged so that the ones attached to this compartment will go off first. Keep that in mind."

Smiling, he left them.

CHAPTER TEN

With an enormous whine the Alliance destroyer went roaring out of the landing bay and into space.

Sitting in the forward passenger seat of his fighter, Baltar watched and chuckled with satisfaction. "Everything's going exactly as I planned," he said.

"Exactly, sir," agreed one of the Cylons in his droning voice. He was seated in the number one pilot seat.

The remote control detonator rested on the dash within reach of Baltar's hand. "What's delaying the shuttle? We can't depart until they're free and clear."

"Shuttle's moving into launch position now," pointed out the second Cylon, who occupied the number two pilot seat.

"Ah, yes, so I see." Baltar's palms gave off a faint rasping sound as he rubbed his hands together.

He sat, a contented smile on his face, watching the shuttle roll into the launching area.

The craft shivered; then fire crackled from its tail and it was zooming free of the *Galactica*.

"Now, it's our turn," said Baltar. "Move our fighter over to the launch area."

"Not yet, sir," droned the Cylon nearest him.

"Not yet? What the devil do you—"

"Certain things must be attended to first." The Cylon's hand snapped out, snatching up the detonator.

"Damn you!" Baltar's hand swung down toward his holstered lasergun.

But the second Cylon had left his seat.

Before Baltar's fingers closed around the gun barrel, the mechanical man was gripping his wrist.

"Idiot," cried Baltar as the pain went zigzagging up his arm. "You're to obey me. You've been programmed to do that."

The Cylon lifted Baltar's weapon from out of its holster, tossed it far across the cockpit. "That is no longer true, sir."

"What are you babbling about?"

The other Cylon had by now succeeded in dismantling the detonator. "We've been reprogrammed, sir," he explained.

"So I've been doublecrossed by Adama after all."

"Yes, such is the case, sir." The Cylon dropped the ruined detonator to the floor and activated a toggle.

The hatch wooshed open.

"I won't say *bon voyage*, Baltar," said Starbuck as he came bounding into the cockpit with pistol drawn, "since you ain't going anyplace. Except back to the prison barge."

"Damn, I should never have trusted any of you." Baltar's shoulders slumped.

"You forget," said Apollo, who'd followed the lieutenant into the ship, "that we know a few tricks ourselves."

"Dirty tricks," added Starbuck with a grin.

Sire Domra's face appeared on the scanner screen. "Now that we're all safely back aboard the *Galactica*, Commander," he began, "the Council has taken a vote."

"I see," said Adama.

"We've decided to rescind our edict and extend your emergency powers. You are once again in full command of the battlestar and the rest of the fleet," Domra told him. "The vote, I might add, was unanimous."

"That's most gratifying."

"I'd also like to add . . . Well, I admire the way you put your own life in jeopardy to help us. And . . . that's all for now, Commander." Looking a bit embarrassed, the Council member signed off.

Adama settled back in his chair, watching the blank screen thoughtfully. "Things certainly have changed," he remarked.

Colonel Tigh was seated nearby. "Let's enjoy the situation while we can," he said. "The Council's scared now, but once their goose bumps go down, they'll start riding us again."

"Probably so," said Adama. "Right now, however, I have other things on my mind."

"Such as the Alliance destroyer that got away."

"That was allowed to get away," corrected the commander.

"I know. We had to let them escape in order to grab Baltar and keep him from blowing up the shuttle."

"And it worked," said the commander. "We've already launched a Recon Patrol to track them to their base on Luna Seven."

"Then we'll find out the strength of the Alliance on that outpost."

"I hope to find a good deal out about this Alliance." Adama stretched up out of his chair. "If you'll take over on the bridge, Tigh, I believe I'll return to my quarters for a rest."

"I didn't know you ever did that."

"Now and then," admitted Adama, walking away.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

He awakened far out in space, with an immense dark silence all around him.

Apollo straightened up, his sleep period over, and checked the control dash of his viper.

"Rise and shine," came Starbuck's jaunty voice from out of the talkbox. "Give a look at your scanner screen, old chum."

The Alliance destroyer, a distant dot, was showing on the screen.

"We've sighted 'em," said Apollo.

"While you were in the land of nod. Any instructions for the troops?"

Apollo glanced out of his cockpit at the viper ships hurtling along in formation with his. "Attention, Blue Squadron," he said into the talkmike. "This is Flight Leader Apollo. We now have our destroyer on the scanner. We'll follow 'em." He paused. "But hear this. I do not, repeat do not, want the ship overtaken. Starbuck, you move out on point. Be careful, stay out of their range."

"Gotcha," replied Starbuck.

"The rest of us'll begin to spread out on either flank of that destroyer," continued Apollo.

Boomer's voice inquired, "How come, sir?"

"To increase our scanner range in case they have any idea of bringing in more ships from the sides to catch us in crossfire."

"Sound plan," agreed Boomer.

"Okay, Blue, we know where target one is," said Apollo. "Let's look around for any more."

At that moment a faint murmuring came out of the speaker.

Frowning, Apollo asked, "Someone trying to contact me?"

There was no response from the men in his viper squadron.

Shaking his head, Apollo said, "Then let's move into our new positions."

The door to Adama's quarters eased open, and his visitor walked in.

The commander looked up from the printout report he'd been scanning. "I didn't know you were going to continue to keep an eye on me," he said, smiling.

Tinia said, "This isn't an official visit. Exactly."

"Sit down," he invited, nodding at a chair facing his.

After seating herself, Siress Tinia said, "I haven't had much chance to talk with you since friend Baltar staged his little fireworks display the other day."

"You'll be pleased to know that he's now safely back aboard the prison barge," Adama said, "in more isolated quarters than he had prior to his escape."

"It was a near thing, though, wasn't it?" she asked, watching his face. "If Starbuck and your son hadn't prevented them from getting farther into the battlestar . . . if those Cylons hadn't been reprogrammed to outfox Baltar . . . people might've been killed. In fact, the *Galactica* might well have been seized, taken over."

"I don't think it would've come to that," the commander said. "This is a pretty tough ship to take over, Tinia. But I'm glad we put down the threat with a minimum of trouble."

"The Council was very impressed with the way you handled things."

"But?"

Tinia said, "Some of my colleagues, I must admit, are like children. It takes more than one lesson before they really learn something."

"I assumed the good feeling between the Council and myself wouldn't last forever. What are they planning?"

"Oh, nothing definite as yet. It's merely that some of them are commencing to have second thoughts. Maybe you aren't infallible after all, perhaps it was unwise to return full control to you. Doubt is creeping back."

"Yes, I expected that."

"What I wanted to tell you, Adama, is that my opinion of you hasn't changed," she said. "I'll continue to support you."

"Learned your lesson, have you?"

She laughed. "I guess I'm a better pupil than some of the others on the Council," she said. "Is there any word from Captain Apollo and the squadron that's tracking the destroyer?"

"I'm expecting a report from Colonel Tigh at any moment," he answered. "If you'd care to stay until we—"

"I think not, no." Tinia rose to her feet. "I'm not very high on the Colonel's list of admirable people at the moment."

"He's simply not fond of anyone who's on the Council," explained Adama as he walked her to the doorway.

"Well, he has good reason not to be." She reached out, caught his hand and squeezed it. "If you need my help, let me know." Smiling quickly, she left him.

Adama stroked his chin as he returned to his chair. "An interesting woman," he said.

Strange murmuring sounds began coming out of his speaker. A brilliant, glaring light filled the cockpit of his viper.

Apollo looked out to his left. "What the devil is that?"

An immense glowing spacecraft, its silvery surface awash with light, was drifting ever closer to his ship.

Apollo reached for his talkmike, but found he couldn't exactly control his hands any longer. His fingers felt heavy, numb.

The noise grew louder and louder. It was something like music played out of tune and something like thousands of crystal pendants rattling in a high wind.

Apollo didn't want to hear it.

He tried to bring his hands up to cover his ears. His hands no longer obeyed him.

"I . . . have to . . ."

He slumped, passed out. Only his safety gear kept him from toppling forward.

Lietenant Starbuck exhaled smoke. "Have you bozos ever got a surprise coming to you," he told the tinydot on his scanner screen. "When your blinking destroyer arrives at—"

"Starbuck." It was Lieutenant Boomer's voice.

"Lieutenant Starbuck stepped out for a breath of air," answered Starbuck in a falsetto. "This is his gorgeous blonde secretary speaking. You can leave a message, sweetie, or you can take a flying—"

"Hey, listen," cut in Boomer, "has the captain pulled up there with you?"

Frowning, Starbuck replied, "Apollo ain't up here, chum, he's back there with you."

"That's just the problem. When he fanned out the squadron, he and I moved off together."

"So?"

"Then he disappeared."

"I'm not hearing you loud and clear," Starbuck informed him. "Sounded like you said Apollo disappeared."

"I did," said Boomer. "He did."

"And you saw him do that?"

"Directly, no. His image vanished, all of a sudden, off my scanner."

Starbuck set his own scanner to look around for the missing Apollo. After a moment he said, "He's nowhere in my vicinity."

"Well, he isn't around here either."

"Then," inquired Starbuck, "where *is* he?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

Commander Adama asked, "Any further word, Colonel?"

Tigh sat opposite him. "Nothing new in the past two centares," he replied. "Frankly, I'm getting concerned."

"Prematurely. The men can take care of themselves," Adama told him. "What concerns me most is what lies beyond that destroyer."

"You mean Luna Seven?"

"Yes, and then Terra. We may well be sailing into a war zone."

Tigh said, "You think they'll risk attacking us?"

"It seems highly likely to me," said the commander. "That's why it's imperative we know their strength on Luna Seven."

Tigh cracked the knuckle of his forefinger. "I'd like to suggest something, but . . ."

"Go ahead," invited Adama.

"Suppose we bypassed Luna Seven entirely," suggested the black colonel. "And took the fleet directly to the mother planet, Terra?"

"What then? How do we find out what the true situation is with the people on that planet? Who's in the right, who's in the wrong?"

"We can assume the Alliance is wrong and—"

"No, we can't do that. We haven't heard both sides," reminded the commander. "I don't want to meddle in their affairs unless it's absolutely necessary. And I certainly don't want to lend our superior technology to the wrong side."

"True, but we have our own people to think of, too."

Adama shook his head. "We wait," he said firmly. "Wait until our patrol finds out what lies ahead on Luna Seven."

He became aware of whiteness.

He was surrounded by it.

Apollo's half-opened eyes took in a glaring white ceiling, glaring white walls.

Just at the edge of his vision he noticed two figures. Blurred figures, fuzzy around the edges, standing there silently watching him.

Swallowing hard, Apollo felt around beneath him. He was stretched out on some sort of padded cot at the center of the room. The cot was white, too.

"This," he said, his voice weak and dry, "this is a trite question in situations like this . . . but I'd really appreciate an answer. Where am I?"

He raised up on one arm to gaze over at the blurred figures across the white room.

Apollo felt suddenly dizzy. He held on, gritting his teeth, and it passed.

"Welcome back, Captain Apollo."

The watchful figures, who seemed to be wearing some sort of cowled robes, hadn't spoken. The voice was coming from above him.

He stared up at the white ceiling. "Could you tell me where I am?" he requested. "And why?"

"What do you remember?" The voice was a deep one and was apparently coming down from an unseen speaker in the ceiling.

Apollo considered the question. "Not too much," he admitted after a moment. "There was a lot of light, some odd noises . . . that's about all."

"That's to be expected."

"Did you . . . grab me somehow out of my ship? Is that it?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

"How? Was I teleported right out of the cockpit?"

The voice said, "Something like that, yes."

"Okay," said Apollo, "where's my ship? I've got to get it back and continue my . . . But you're probably not going to let me do that, right?"

"Not immediately."

"Yeah, but look . . . A lot of lives may depend on me. I have —"

"A great many more lives depend on your . . . assisting us."

"Assist you with what?"

"Do you think you can walk?"

Apollo thought about it. Then he sat up. There wasn't much dizziness this time. "I can give it a try," he answered.

"There's someone you have to meet," the voice informed him. "If you'll get up and follow my custodians."

The two robed figures were already, silently, as though they were floating across the white floor, moving toward a curtained doorway.

Apollo swung his booted feet to the floor. He took a slow breath and stood up.

No dizziness at all.

Walking carefully, he followed the two custodians out of the room.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Starbuck gunned his viper until he was flying alongside Boomer's craft. "Not a trace," he said. "I've flown to the edges of the squadron formation and he just isn't with us anymore."

"Nobody's seen him?"

"Nope."

"This," observed Boomer, "doesn't make much sense."

"Not one heck of a lot," agreed Starbuck. "If Apollo was in trouble he'd have signaled us. If he'd run into an enemy ship, somebody'd have seen it."

"We got us a mystery on our hands," said Boomer, "for sure."

"Okay," said Starbuck, "I think we better backtrack, see if we can find some clue as to what happened to Apollo."

"Okay, but—"

"Lieutenant Jolly can take over with the Squadron and stay on the destroyer's tail," said Starbuck, "while we go hunting."

"Yeah, okay," agreed Boomer. "So let's go."

The next room was also white, but larger than the one Apollo had awakened in.

There was thick white carpeting on the floor and three white chairs.

Seated in one of them was a man with close-cropped white hair. He wore a two-piece suit of a cut Apollo was unfamiliar with. The suit was white.

"Sit down, Captain," the man invited. "Time is running out for us and—"

"Wait now," said Apollo, stopping beside one of the two empty chairs. His guides were no longer in the room. He wasn't exactly certain where they'd gone. "You still haven't told me where I am."

"That would require more time than we have."

Apollo had his head cocked to one side. "You're not the guy who was talking to me out of the ceiling," he decided.

"No, I am not," the man replied, smiling slightly.

"Suppose you commence our little talk by telling me who you are?"

"Names really mean nothing. Call me what you like."

"Don't tempt me."

"John," suggested the man. "Will that do? Is that the sort of name you're familiar with?"

"Not especially."

"Right, I was thinking of Terra," said John. "On Terra it's a very common name."

Apollo dragged the chair a few feet closer to the white-suited man, sat in it. "Look, John," he said, "I'm more interested in who and what you are. And why you . . . kidnaped me."

"Yes, I see. All recollection of your prior visit was blocked out, wasn't it." He nodded to himself. "In a way, you and I are brothers. Remember, I'm giving you a simplified explan—"

"Brothers?"

"Although we're generations, eons actually, apart, still we —"

"Are you from Terra?"

"No, not exactly," answered John. "If I were they wouldn't be in so much trouble." He rested his hands on the arms of his chair. "That's where you come in, Captain. You've got to help them out."

"Me?" He shook his head in disbelief. "I don't understand —"

"In order to help yourself, you must help them," said John. "If events continue on their present course, serious things will happen in less than a fortnight."

"What sort of—"

"You've got to move swiftly," John told him. "We'll get you as close to Terra as we can without causing . . . complications. Then you're on your own."

"What are you talking about? Terra is so far away, it'd take —"

"Our ship will be there before you know it."

"Is that what we're on now, some kind of spaceship?"

John nodded. "Now then, Captain, once you arrive at your destination, you do your best to avert a war."

"A war?" Apollo got up. "This doesn't make any sense, John. You tell me you are eons ahead of me, but you want me to stop a war on a planet I don't know a damn thing about."

"The simple truth is, I could not even be seen by the people of Terra beyond the environment of this ship."

Apollo sat down, frowning at his host. "Why is that?"

"Because I have no physical body as you know it."

Pointing at him, Apollo said, "What's sitting in that chair, then?"

"A reflection of intelligence. My spirit, in a sense."

Apollo leaned back in the chair, glanced up at the white ceiling for a few seconds. "Do you think, John, that when you folks teleported me from my ship to yours, you left some of my brain behind?" he inquired. "Because I don't seem to be getting much of this."

"In some ways you're not capable of understanding it all. But complete understanding is not necessary for you to

perform—"

"At least tell me why you even care what happens to people on Terra. If you're so advanced, and I take your word that you are, John, then what difference does it make to you?"

"What happens on Terra affects us as well as you," answered John. "We are, however, only in a position to advise."

Apollo clasped his hands together and leaned forward. "I get the feeling I'm not going to get out of this unless I agree to help you."

"That's the situation."

"Okay, then fill me in on the mission you have in mind."

"Most of it you'll quickly ascertain for yourself once you're on Terra," said John. "Do, though, let me warn you that some of the people you encounter will seem to think of you as someone they already know."

Apollo said, "I don't get that."

"You haven't time to build a credibility for yourself on Terra," explained John. "Therefore, Captain, we're borrowing someone else's identity for you."

"Borrowing an identity?" Apollo nodded. "Yeah, well, I guess if you can pluck me out of my viper, you can borrow an identity."

"It isn't a difficult thing to do. He's a warrior, one who's missing in combat."

"Missing where?"

"He's being held prisoner on Luna One. He'll eventually turn up free," said John. "Oh, by the way, I'd better mention that he's somewhat of a scoundrel. He is, however, all we have to work with on such short notice."

"This sounds better by the minute," said Apollo.

"You won't be the most well-liked man on Terra, but you ought to be able to overcome a small handicap like that."

"Guess I'm going to have to," said Apollo. "When do I leave on this mission?"

John smiled, almost paternally. "Now, Captain," he said.

"Now? What do . . ."

Apollo blinked. He was back in his viper, strapped into his seat.

He laughed. "Boy, I'm going to have to give up the night life," he said, shaking his head. "Or maybe have my air mixture in this crate rechecked. Having a dream like that really . . . ooops!"

He looked up from his control panel and out the cockpit window.

Looming large dead ahead was a planet.

A planet he'd never seen before.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Commander Adama stood by a view window in his quarters. Somewhere out there in that far stretching blackness were his son and the viper squadron. And farther beyond that, perhaps the planet they'd been questing for for so long. "What's the latest news?" he asked as Tigh came into the room.

"I'm not sure." Tigh stopped beside a chair and ran his fingertips back and forth along its back.

Facing him, Adama requested, "Could you amplify that remark, Colonel?"

"The squadron is still in pursuit of the Alliance destroyer, but . . ." He made a vague gesture with his right hand. "Well, Captain Apollo's ship seems to have disappeared."

"Disappeared?" Deep creases appeared on Adama's broad forehead. "My son's viper?"

The black colonel nodded. "It simply . . . isn't there anymore."

"What do the other ships in the squadron have to say about that?"

"They've passed beyond the direct communication range," answered Tigh.

The commander moved for the doorway. "Let's get to the bridge," he said. "I want to check the geoscan, see if we can pick up his ship's emergency beacon signal."

"I've already tried that and—"

"We'll try again." Adama went striding into the corridor.

Apollo's viper had come to rest in a clearing in a wooded area. He rechecked what his control dash had to tell him.

"Let's see . . . atmosphere compatible . . . no breathing gear necessary . . . no dangerous radiation . . . no major pollutants in air . . ."

Apollo sighed, leaning back in his seat and taking another long look out into the moonlit night woods.

The trees were tall, thick with green leaves. He'd never seen trees exactly like these before, waking or sleeping.

"Well, sir, it really looks as though this isn't a dream after all," Apollo said aloud. "So I might as well get out and take a look around."

He unfastened his safety gear, unlocked the hatch and dropped clear of the ship. There was loamy earth, dotted with clumps of grass, underfoot. The grass was green.

Looking up through the intertwining of leaves and branches, he scanned the night sky. The stars were in unfamiliar positions.

Apollo shivered, even though the soft wind that was rustling through the forest was warm.

"Next time I take a job from a mystical guy in a white suit," he told himself, "I'm going to demand more details in front."

Turning his back on the viper, he started walking in a westerly direction.

The woodland was dark and quiet, but from far off came faint sounds. Hums and murmurs that indicated there was a technological civilization not too far off.

After Apollo had been trudging through the pathless forest for nearly half a centare, he began to be aware of a diffused glow showing above the tree tops. That meant he was approaching a settlement of some size, a city perhaps.

"Might as well try to find out why I'm here," he said.

She didn't know why she was doing this at all.

"I should've told him to go to hell," she said as she guided the sleek, swiftly moving landcar along the curving night roadway.

Well, actually she wasn't even certain if he was the one who'd called her. The voice had been so darn distant and faraway sounding.

Brenda Farris shook her head. "If there's a chance he's out here, alive and well, then . . ."

She was a slim, dark-haired young woman, pretty. As she drove she scanned the side of the roadway, hunting for some sign of him at the edge of the woods.

"Why the devil he's out here I don't know," she said. "But then, a good many things he does don't make sense. I notice, though, that he turns to me when he wants help. And not some other . . ."

She wasn't even certain how many other women there were.

More than one.

"More than a half dozen probably," murmured Brenda, watching the roadway through narrowed eyes.

"Sometimes I'd like to kill him and then . . . there he is!"

She punched out a parking pattern, flipped the braking toggle.

The landcar slid to a stop just off the edge of the roadway.

She activated the window opening device on the far side of the car. Night air, scented with the smell of damp earth and wild flowers, came rushing in.

Apollo came walking over to her car. "Don't be alarmed," he told her, with what he hoped was an ingratiating smile. "I'd appreciate a lift to the nearest city. This may sound a bit strange, but I'm not cert—"

"Charlie, what are you up to now?"

"Huh?" He crouched some to look directly into the landcar at her.

"Why are you pretending not to know me? Is this another cute trick you—"

"What was that you just called me?"

"Your name. Charlie Watts." With an impatient gesture she unlatched the door on his side of the landcar. "Oh, c'mon, get in, will you. We'd better talk."

"Yep," agreed Apollo as he climbed aboard, "we'd better."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The city looked strange, yet vaguely familiar at the same time. Apollo could guess at the functions of most of the buildings and vehicles he was seeing, but their shapes were odd. The buildings rose high and were linked with curving ramps at walkways at various levels. The structures were mostly huge panels of tinted glass and fretworks of shimmering metal. Up above the roadways and ramps, hovercraft darted from tower to tower.

"I thought you were dead," Brenda was saying as she drove them deeper into the glittering city.

"I'm not," he said, "apparently."

"You were gone for weeks, Charlie, nobody knew where. Then you call me in practically the middle of the night to rush out and pick you up," she continued. "That was you who phoned me, wasn't it?"

"Not exactly." He still wasn't quite certain who this attractive young woman was, but he had a strong hunch the mysterious John had something to do with bringing them together. "I had someone contact you."

"Who?"

"Just a helpful passerby."

She frowned over at him. "And why are you dressed like that? It looks like some sort of party costume." The girl herself was clad in a blue-and-grey jumpsuit that looked as if it might be a uniform of some kind.

"Well," began Apollo, "my plane crashed in the—"

"Are you hurt? Is that why you haven't gotten in touch with anyone?"

"I'm not hurt," said Apollo, "so much as I'm . . . a bit confused."

"I think we better get you right to a hospital," she said. "You have been sounding . . . dazed."

"No, I'm not in need of hospital attention," he assured her. "Isn't there someplace where we can go and talk? I'm still disoriented."

"Then a hospital is exactly—"

"No hospital." His lasergun was in his hand, pointed at her. "I was hoping we could do this all in a friendly—"

"Charlie, you don't have to point a gun at me to . . . What kind of gun is that, anyway?"

"I'll explain things when we . . . By the way, what's your name?"

The landcar shimmied some as she glanced at him. "You . . . you really don't remember?"

"I told you, I'm unsettled and—"

"Brenda," she said, lips thinning. "Brenda Farris. You and I are supposed to be in love. Or have you forgotten that, too?"

"Brenda, I'll try to do the best I can to fill you in," he promised. "Now can you take us someplace where—"

"How about my apartment?"

He nodded. "That sounds fine."

"You remember my apartment, don't you?"

Apollo shook his head. "Afraid not."

"Damn," she murmured.

Starbuck banked his viper, muttering, "C'mon, Apollo, show up."

Boomer's voice came out of the speaker. "I don't like to cast gloom," he said, "but we got us just barely enough fuel to finish our mission and get back home to the *Galactica*."

"Where is he? Where'd he go?"

"I hate to say it, but maybe we just aren't going to find him at all."

"Heck, we can't quit now," insisted Starbuck, teeth grinding on his cigar. "He's out here someplace and I intend to—"

"Might help if we could get the *Galactica* to come to us," mused Boomer. " 'Cept we're too far for voice communications."

Starbuck tapped the fingers of his left hand on the control dash. "Suppose we turned on our long-range distress beacons?"

"That'd work, but any Alliance destroyers in the vicinity'll be able to pick up the signal, too."

"Think I'll risk it." Starbuck activated his beacon.

"Okay, count me in, too."

"Now we just . . . Hey! I'm getting a long-range distress signal on my long-range scanner."

Boomer said, "So am I."

"Got to be Apollo!"

"But there's no possible way he could've outflown our normal scanners in so short a time as—"

"Be that as it may," cut in Starbuck, watching the tiny throbbing dot of light on his screen, "that has got to be our wandering boy."

There was a note of skepticism in Boomer's voice. "But it's coming from the wrong direction."

"Even so, old chum."

"On top of which, it's beyond the point of no return. We don't have enough fuel to get there and back."

"Then I'll have to cross my fingers and hope the fleet picks up my beacon signal," said Starbuck. " 'Cause I'm going to find Apollo."

"Okay, then I'm tagging along."

"Nope, you can't," Starbuck told him.

"I'm as anxious as you are to find the guy and—"

"True, but you're going to have to take over command of the squadron. Our primary mission is still to track that damn destroyer to Luna Seven."

"Suppose we lose both you and Apollo, what—"

"Have a little faith in me," said Starbuck. "I'll find him and bring us both back. Have no fear . . . see you." His viper went into a steep bank, moving swiftly away from Boomer's ship.

"Good luck," said Boomer.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Apollo crossed the circular living room. The sounds of the night city were muted up here in this tower apartment. There was a rectangular mirror inset in one section of the pale blue wall.

He stopped close in front of it, touching his face. "I don't look any different," he said quietly.

"What was that?" Brenda was standing near a low sofa, watching him.

"Nothing, just thinking out loud."

"You were injured in the crash, weren't you?"

Facing her, Apollo answered, "Nope, not really."

"Then why were you so anxious to get a look at your face?"

"Just wanted to make sure it was the same one I started out with this morning."

"Charlie, not much of what you've said so far makes any sense." Her frown was deepening.

"That's something else we're going to have to discuss," he said. "You keep calling me Charlie Watts, but actually—"

"Before we talk," she said, holding up a hand in a wait-a-minute gesture, "let me change out of my uniform." She moved toward a doorway.

"Don't get in touch with anyone," he warned, tapping his holstered lasergun.

Shaking her head, she said, "You ought to know me better than that, Charlie." She went through the doorway, closing the door behind her.

Apollo crossed the room and stood listening at the shut door.

"You can't really tell her the truth."

Spinning suddenly around, Apollo saw the man called John sitting comfortably on the low sofa.

"How'd you get here?" Apollo demanded. "I thought you told me nobody could see you on—"

"They can't, you can." He tapped the side of his head. "The point is, you have to pretend you're Charlie Watts. I came to warn you not to confide anything in this young lady, since that would—"

"Who in the hell is this Charlie Watts?"

"Someone whose identity will get you into a governing body called the Precedium," answered the white-suited man. "You're going to tell them the truth about what's happening on Luna Seven and Paradeen."

Apollo touched his face. "And I look just like Charlie?"

"To them," said John.

Brenda glanced once again at the picturephone alcove across her bedroom.

"There is something wrong with him," she told herself. "Something seriously wrong."

Slowly, walking like a reluctant child, she went to the alcove and sat in the chair that faced the phonescreen.

"Charlie's played some nasty jokes on me from time to time. But nothing like this," she said. "He's not pretending he doesn't know me, he really doesn't."

She sat with her hands folded in her lap for a moment, then sighed, leaned forward and punched out a series of numbers. The small rectangular phonescreen turned from grey to deep black.

"Security number?" requested a bland mechanical voice.

"800-212-1441," she repounded.

The screen snapped to a brilliant yellow and a few seconds later a stern-faced man's image was there. "Yes, Farris?"

"Something's happened, Brace . . ."

"Yes, go on." His thick eyebrows and thick moustache made two nearly straight lines across his tanned face.

"He's back."

"Watts?"

"Yes."

"Where was he?"

"I . . . I'm not certain. There was a crash and . . . he's been hurt, Brace."

"Badly?"

"Not physically, no, but . . . he's acting very strangely. He doesn't seem to know who I am and—"

"We'll get a team over there right away," promised Brace. "Be careful, don't take any chances."

"I won't."

The phonescreen turned black, then grey.

Apollo had been talking to John.

"Okay," he'd said, pacing the pale blue carpeting, "I know something about what went on on Paradeen. I was there, I saw what happened."

"I know that, which is why—"

"Yeah, but I don't know a blinking thing about Luna Seven," Apollo told the white-suited man, halting to point at him. "If I get up in front of this . . . what did you call, it?"

"Precedium."

"What can I possibly tell 'em about Luna Seven? I don't have more than a vague—"

"What you don't know, I'll supply."

"And they're going to fall for this dodge? I come strolling into this Precedium and say, 'Hi, folks, I'm good old Charlie Watts,' and they're all going to accept it?"

"Yes."

"Did he look anything like me?"

"No, he was a handsome man."

"Very funny, but—"

"They'll perceive you as looking like Watts."

"An illusion?"

"Most things are, but we don't have time to go into that," said John. "The important thing to remember is—"

"All right, I'll tell all I know, all you pump into me by way of information," conceded Apollo, stopping his pacing in the vicinity of the sofa. "But if I get the feeling you're abandoning me, I'll tell the truth."

John's smile spread slowly and then vanished. "This culture isn't very different from the ones you know, Apollo. If you tell them about me, they'll merely assume you're crazy and lock you up."

Apollo scratched his ribs and thought about that. "You're not kidding about that, that nobody but me can see you?"

"Only you."

"What a treat." He sat down next to the white-suited man. "Explain to me again why I'm putting on this show."

"We're helping not just these people, but yours as well."

"Fine, but I need a heck of a lot more details than—"

"I'm not at all certain I can work that way."

"You darn well better find out, old buddy. I want to be sure whose side you're on before I—"

"I'm on your side, Charlie," said Brenda from the doorway of her bedroom. "You know that."

Apollo looked from her to John. "Can't see you?"

"Not at all."

"Or hear you?"

John shook his head. "As far as the young lady is concerned, I'm not here."

"I wouldn't mind being in her position."

Brenda came over to him, took his hand and started to seat herself next to him. "Is something—"

"Watch it, you'll plump right down on his lap if . . . That is . . . That's a very pretty dress."

"You bought it for me."

"Did I? Well, it just goes to prove that I have excellent taste."

She sat. John was no longer there. "Charlie, no matter what happens . . . you know I love you." She moved her hand, tentatively, up to stroke his cheek. "You walked out on me six weeks ago without so much as a word . . . and just two weeks after that my father was reported missing in action. It's been a very rough—"

"Your father? Did I know him?"

"Yes, you knew him. Charlie, you really aren't yourself . . . and so—"

"You're right, I'm not myself. But, with your help, Brenda, I can do what I have to do. You see—"

The door had begun making a low humming sound.

Apollo straightened. "What's wrong?"

"It's only the doorbell." She stood, nervous. "Remember, Charlie, whatever happens . . . it's for your own good."

"I don't like the sound of that," he said.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Colonel Tigh came hurrying across the bridge. "I think you better come take a look at the number three geoscan screen," he said to the commander.

Adama followed him back. "What is it?"

"Emergency beacons from vipers two and four are transmitting from this area of the quadrant," explained Tigh, indicating the pale green screen.

"Starbuck's ship and Boomer's," said the commander. He reached out, pushing the readout button.

A sheet of pale green paper came whispering out of a slot beneath the screen.

"They're quite a distance from Luna Seven," said Adama, studying the printout sheet.

"If our geoscan is correct," said Tigh, "the signals are coming from quite near Terra."

"Can the destroyer have bypassed Luna Seven and headed for Terra?"

"It's a possibility," replied Tigh doubtfully, "but I don't think the destroyer has that kind of speed."

"Have you communicated with the viper squadron?"

"They're out of range. We can only pick up the emergency beacon blips; we can't communicate with them."

Adama was frowning at the screen. "Something's obviously going wrong," he said. "We have to catch up with them."

"At this speed that's not likely to—"

"We'll set a course for Terra," decided Adama, "and travel at light speed."

"It's been some time, if you don't mind my mentioning it, since this battlestar has tried traveling at—"

"Nevertheless, we'll do it." Adama strode to a talkmike and picked it up. "Patch me in to the entire fleet."

Tigh cracked his knuckles, glanced at the geoscan screen and then at the commander.

"The *Galactica* must temporarily leave the fleet," Adama was saying, his voice going out to all the ships in the space fleet. "We'll be rendezvousing with one of our patrols. Your captains will all be given instructions via fleet navigation. Thank you." He let the mike drop to his side.

"Do you think the emergency has something to do with Apollo's whereabouts?" asked Colonel Tigh.

"All I know now is that there is an emergency," answered the commander, "and that we have to do something about it."

The door of the young woman's apartment snapped open.

Two men in grey uniforms came swiftly in, side by side, each with a pistol in hand.

The barrels of both weapons were looking right at the seated Apollo.

"We don't want any trouble, Colonel," said the taller of the two men. He had a lean face, and the hair showing beneath the rim of his grey helmet was sand-colored.

"Seems like I've been promoted," remarked Apollo. "Just yesterday I was a captain and now—"

"Colonel Watts," said the man, "I'm here to request that you—"

"Am I supposed to know these fellows?" Apollo asked the nervous girl.

Brenda swallowed, shook her head. "No, I don't suppose so," she answered finally. "They won't hurt you, though, or —"

"Do you know them? I suppose you must, since you're turning me in to—"

"I'm Agent Gilliland," said the one with sandy hair.

The second man eased closer to the sofa Apollo was seated on. "We've met before, Colonel, although you may not remember," he said. His free hand was touching the ends of his dark, straight moustache. "I'm Brace. No need to shake hands."

"Since you came barging in with drawn guns, I don't guess this is a simple social call."

"We'd like you," said Brace, "to come with us."

"Where to?"

"Elsewhere," said Brace.

Apollo, slowly, stood up. "I don't suppose," he said, "I can persuade you to take me directly to the Precedium?"

Brace shook his head. "Not just yet, sir. Sorry."

Brenda said, "Go with them, Charlie. Please. It's for your own good."

"Don't bet on that," said Apollo. "Okay, fellows, lead on."

The viper came skimming in over the forest at dawn.

Starbuck, cigar at a jaunty angle, was concentrating on landing at just the right spot.

"Get set for a reunion, Apollo," he announced. "I'm just about caught up with you."

The tracking device on his control panel told him he was flying ever closer to Apollo's missing ship.

"Bingo!" said Starbuck when his scanner screen showed him the viper itself, directly below.

Decelerating, he circled the clearing and then set down his ship in the same clearing with Apollo's.

"Deft," he congratulated himself. "A very deft and lovely landing, m'boy."

As soon as his ship informed him it was safe to go out, Starbuck came bounding out into the clearing.

The early morning light was a thin grey; a chill dampness hung over the ground. Off in the brush small animals were stirring.

"Apollo?" called the lieutenant as he doubletimed over to the other viper.

The ship was silent, its surface beaded with dew.

After making a circle of the craft and determining there was no one inside the cockpit, Starbuck tried the hatch handle.

The door opened with no trouble.

Climbing inside, Starbuck looked around the cockpit. No sign of any trouble or violence.

And no sign of Apollo either.

Nodding, shifting his cigar to the other side of his mouth, Starbuck went to the dash and flipped a small red toggle.

A low hum commenced, then Apollo's voice came out of a speaker.

"This is Captain Apollo," he began. "I'm leaving this message in case any of the *Galactica* warriors succeed in tracking me here. I'm about to set out on foot for the nearest city. I'll keep my personal communicator on standby to act as a homing device."

Silence followed.

Starbuck was about to turn off the switch when Apollo spoke further.

"If, as I sort of suspect, it's you who find this crate first, Starbuck," he said, "let me tell you, old buddy, that you are not going to believe what is going on. Not sure I believe it myself. See you soon . . . Bye."

Starbuck made an impatient gesture at the speaker. "C'mon, don't be so darn coy. Give with some more details."

The message, however, was over.

Going to the nearest city. Involved in something incredible. Starbuck flipped ashes on the cockpit floor and scratched his backside. "Guess I'd better turn on my own communicator and see if I can trail him. I noticed a city when I was flying in and that must be . . . Oops."

Someone was standing on the viper's ladder, staring in at him through the open hatchway.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Do you know me?" the man in the white tunic asked Apollo.

"Should I?"

"My name is Doctor Horning." He was a small man, middle-aged, balding. "We've met before."

"Sorry, you don't ring a bell." Apollo shrugged.

He was sitting on an examining table in a glass-walled room. The walls were blank and he couldn't tell what was going on behind them. Three ball-shaped light fixtures floated up near the ceiling.

"How'd you get here?" asked the doctor.

"Some lads in uniform dragged me in. Actually I wanted to go right to the Precedium, but they had other—"

"I meant, how did you get back to Terra?"

Apollo glanced around. "Do you have some of your colleagues on the other side of these one-way walls?"

"Do you feel as though you're being watched?"

Apollo laughed. "You've been working here too long, Doc . . . This is a mental institution, isn't it?"

"It's a government facility," answered Horning. "As you know."

Folding his arms, Apollo said, "I've been trying to figure out how I must look to you. I can understand why you well might think I'm goofy, but that sort of attitude isn't going to help either one of—"

"Colonel Watts, you seem to be evading most of my questions."

"First off, let me explain that . . . and you'll have to take this on faith, since you probably think you're seeing Charlie Watts . . . Anyway, I'm not Watts. So we—"

"Who do you think you are?"

"That doesn't really matter. You can call me Watts if you like, might be simpler all around," said Apollo. "Listen, the important thing is I have a message for the Precedium. An important message."

The doctor asked, "You feel that way about yourself, Colonel Watts? That you're very important?"

"Not me, the message," answered Apollo, letting some of his impatience show in his voice. "Apparently they're not aware of the real situation out there." He pointed ceilingward. "Your outposts on Luna Seven and Paradeen, for instance, have been all but wiped out. Further—"

"How do you know that, Colonel?"

"Well, I was on Paradeen. I saw what had happened there," replied Apollo. "As for the other Luna outposts, from One through—"

"You were never on Paradeen."

"Charlie Watts wasn't, no," said Apollo. "Which is why you're confused. Frankly, if I were to plan how to get this information to the right people, I might not have picked this whole Charlie Watts dodge. But since we're both stuck with it, let's see if—"

"Would you excuse me for a moment," broke in the doctor. "I'll be back with you very soon."

"While you're out," suggested Apollo, "suppose you notify the Precedium that I have some—"

"Yes, yes," said the doctor as he crossed to the door. "You just relax, Colonel, and don't worry about anything."

"Well, doggone," said the figure in the viper doorway, "you sure enough look like as how you might be one of us."

Starbuck's right hand was hovering in the immediate vicinity of his holster. "I'm not sure if that's an insult or a compliment."

The robot who was gazing in at him was mansized, with a round ball of a head. His eyes were of pinkish plastic; his voicebox had been made to resemble a mouth with a permanent broad grin; he had no nose. He wore a faded blue coverall over his dented silvery body and had an animal skin hat with its tail dangling down the back of his jointed neck.

"Shucks, I didn't mean as how you looked like a 'bot," he explained. "What I was getting at was that you seem to be a loner, an outsider. Ain't you?"

"I'm not from around here, that's for sure," admitted the lieutenant.

"Knowed that right off. Minute I got a whiff of that stogie you're puffing on." The ball head ticked a few times from side to side. "I ain't never smelled me nothing like that on Terra afore. Oh, dang!" He snapped his fingers, producing a metallic ping. "Excuse my manners. I never introduced myself proper. My name is Will/F." He held out his silvery right hand. "That's W-I-L-L slash F."

"Pleased to meet you, Willie." Starbuck shook hands with the robot. "I'm called Starbuck."

The robot produced a whistling sound. It seemed to come out of one of his metallic ears. "Doggone, if that ain't a right nice name. Sort of poetical and all."

Starbuck retrieved his hand, puffed on his cigar and inquired, "Does everyone on Terra talk the way you do?"

"Ain't it something?" His head shook once again, causing the furry tail to flicker back and forth. "Nope, heck no. I up and reprogrammed myself, basing my mode of speech on some lingo I come across in our library. Afore that, why, heck, I went around like all the rest of them poor servos, talking like this here . . . 'Message for Captain Maresca . . .

Colonel Berrill report to Briefing Room 23 . . .' Like that there. Shoot, but that was powerful awful boring day in and day out."

"How'd you get them to reprogram you?"

Will/F gave a tinny chuckle. "Hellsfire, Starbuck, *they* never done it. I done it my own self, after doing a lot of secret researching in the library. We had us a humdinger of a research library at the Complex."

"Hey, robots can't reprogram themselves. That violates the basic laws of—"

"Aw, that's a lot of horse puckey, friend," the robot assured him. "Naw, if you want to do something bad enough, why, heck, you can do it."

"Tell you, Will," said Starbuck, "what I would really like to do is find my friend. He was in this ship and—"

"He sure enough was, yep. I seen it land. From about a mile or so over yonder, in our hideaway," said the robot. "Yep. Thing is, I'd never in all my born days seen a ship like this here one and, I got to admit, it sort of give me a start first off." He scratched at his side through his coverall. "Once I got over it, though, why I up and says to the bunch that I was gonna mosey over here and have a looksee. They said to leave well enough alone, but—"

"You saw my friend?"

"I'm coming to that, Starbuck. Don't go butting in so much," Will/F told him. "Anyways, by the time I got here, your pal was gone."

"You know where?"

"Well, sure I do. I wouldn't go telling you this long yarn if I didn't have no ways to end it," said the mechanical man. "See, I am built so as I can follow a trail good as a hound dog. So I start tracking him through these here woods."

Didn't get a gander at him till he was out on the roadway, 'bout two miles or so yonder."

"Which way was he going?"

"I'm getting to that, just keep your dang britches on," said Will/F. "Afore I could get close to this cronie of yours, whysir, big slick landcar wooshes up and, danged if he don't hop in."

"Who was in the car?"

"Pretty gal." He whistled again.

"Did she use force to get him into—"

"Heck, when you're that pretty, you don't need no force."

"Do you know who she was?"

"Nope. Wish that I did."

"And they headed toward the city?"

"Yep, that's where they was aiming for," answered the robot. "If you'd like I can show you a slick shortcut for getting there without no . . . Holy darn!"

Starbuck heard it, too.

A chuffing sound from up above.

Looking up, he saw a hovercraft dropping down out of the grey morning sky. "Would this be local law enforcement?"

"It sure enough is," said Will/F ruefully. "And it looks like we ain't gonna have no chance to hightail it away from here."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Doctor Horning shoved the file folder on his desk an exact half-inch to the right. "Physically Colonel Watts is in excellent shape," he said to the man sitting opposite him. "In a way that's puzzling, since one would expect him to show some signs of the ordeal he's obviously been—"

"Tell me a bit more about his mental state," requested Arthur Moore. He was a medium-sized man, with a pale face and pale hair, clad in a one-piece civilian suit.

"He's suffering from delusions," replied the doctor. "He assured me that our Luna outposts have been destroyed by the Eastern Alliance and that—"

"That sort of talk," said Moore, "even when it's only the rantings of a madman, can be dangerous."

"I prefer to call the colonel disturbed, Mr. Moore. The term madman doesn't—"

"Where has he been all this time?"

"I'm afraid I can't get a coherent answer out of him." Doctor Horning shook his head. "He insists he isn't even Colonel Watts at all."

"Oh, so?" Moore rubbed his pale fingertips together. "Who is he?"

"He told me I wouldn't understand, so I might as well call him Charlie Watts."

"The safest thing to do," said Moore, "is to keep the colonel in detention."

"For how long? He really ought to be transferred to a facility where—"

"Until I can brief the President."

Horning pushed the folder another half-inch to the right. "But the Precedium should be notified," he said. "Don't they intend to bestow posthumous honors on Colonel Watts in a few days? Surely the fact that he's alive and well is something they ought—"

"The decision as to whether the Precedium is to be informed or not is the President's," said Moore. "Not yours, not mine."

"Yes, but they believe he's dead and he—"

"You have your duties here, Doctor Horning," said Moore. "They don't include usurping the President's authority." He stood up, slowly. "I want no one else to know that Colonel Watts has returned or that he's your guest here at the Governmental Medical Complex."

"Very well, but—"

"I'll contact you again, Doctor, as soon as I know anything." He started for the door.

"What about our other patient in detention?" asked Horning, rising.

Moore stopped with his hand on the door handle. "The President hasn't as yet come to any decision on him," he said over his shoulder.

"I don't like to see this facility turning into some sort of prison for—"

"What you like or dislike, Doctor, has nothing to do with the present situation," Moore informed him. "And I'd hate to have to report to the President that you were less than cooperative."

After a few silent seconds the doctor said, "I'll await some word from you."

"Very good." Moore gave him a quick nod and went out of his office.

"Hotdogs," remarked Will/F, whistling. "We're in a fix for sure."

Two uniformed men were disembarking from the freshly landed hovercraft. Each held a ready pistol.

Starbuck's own weapon was in his hand, set for stun. "Let me do the negotiating, Will."

"Heck, I ain't anxious to mess with the law in any shape nor form."

"I'm Agent Emerz," said one of the young lawmen. "Please step clear of your craft and surrender your weapon."

"Nope, I'm not in the mood to do that," Starbuck informed him as he moved into the doorway opening. "See, I dropped in to find my—"

"These two craft are not from Terra," said Emerz. "Therefore we assume you are an intruder in airspace under the protection of the People's Nationalist Alliance."

"I suppose you could say that," admitted Starbuck, eyeing both of them. "Thing is, that doesn't—"

"I'm repeating my request that you surrender," said Emerz, pointing his gun at Starbuck. "You will have to submit to interrogation."

"Well, maybe later we can have a nice chat. But right now I intend to do some hunting," said Starbuck. "Have either of you guys seen my partner? He was in this ship and—"

"We know nothing of him," said Emerz. "Please surrender that weapon at once."

"You're sure you didn't run him in?"

"You have exactly one minute to surrender. Then we must —"

"I hate to do this, fellas, but I'm going to have to. You'll wake up in maybe a couple centares. Okay?" Grinning, he fired two blasts of his pistol.

One for each man.

Emerz sensed it and tried to squeeze the trigger of his own gun.

But the stunbeam sprayed across his chest before he could get off a shot. His body stiffened, quivered, then went slack. He collapsed on the dewy grass of the clearing.

His partner got his dose of stunbeam about a second later. He folded up, too, and tumbled down across Emerz.

"Gosh all mighty!" exclaimed Will/F with awe and admiration. "That there is some blunderbuss you're toting around, Starbuck. What the heck is it?"

"Standard issue where I come from." He took a careful look around, then dropped the gun back in its holster.

"Ain't never seen nothing like that hereabouts." His ball of a head shook from side to side.

"Seems to me the best policy for us," said Starbuck, dropping free of the viper, "is to get us the hell out of here. Soonest."

"Yep, that's a dang good notion." The robot adjusted his fur cap and followed Starbuck.

"You were mentioning something about showing me a sneaky way to enter the city."

"Sure, we got all kinds of ways worked out," answered Will/F. "Being renegades and such, we've learned to be sly. You ain't sly, you get cooked. Like I almost was this morning here. That, see, comes from getting so het up over jawing with you that I—"

"Willie, you're doing it again."

"Danged if I ain't." He took hold of Starbuck's left arm. "C'mon along, I'll take you to our hideaway first off and then we'll show you how to get where you want to go. You got any clear idea where your pal is?"

"I will soon as I get this communicator activated." Starbuck fished out the small hand-sized device. It caught the increasing light of the new morning. "Who have you got in your hideaway? Because I don't know if I'm ready to meet a whole crew of—"

"Won't take but a minute or two," said Will/F, tugging the lieutenant across the clearing. "They's only Scrapyard Slim, he's a homemade robot who run off, and Longsight Sue, who's got an ability to see into the future sometimes, and 3D, who's human more or less and sort of strange but likeable, and Blore, who used to be a robot butler before he figured out how to reprogram himself, and Mr. Snell, who's good at building things and . . . Wellsir, that's about all at the present moment. We got what you might call a fluctuating population."

Starbuck took a puff of his cigar. "Let's get going then, Willie."

CHAPTER TWENTY

The detention cell was about twenty feet square, with walls of a light grey color.

Apollo found he'd be sharing it.

As the metal door clanged shut, a slim young man who'd been sitting on the edge of one of the two cots stood up. "I'll be damned," he said. "Never thought I'd see you again, Charlie."

He was not too steady on his feet and there were slashes of shadow beneath his eyes.

"I'd better explain," Apollo told him, "that I've been having trouble remembering people here on Terra. So . . ."

Frowning, the thin young man came forward with his hand held out. "Hell, I'm George Storm. Captain George Storm. Are you trying to tell me you don't even know who—"

"Things have been a bit rough lately, George. No, I didn't recognize—"

"Has that bastard Horning been shooting drugs into you, too?" Storm rubbed at his left arm above the elbow. "He says it's just to calm me down, but . . . well, my memory is a shade fuzzy at times, too."

"How long have you been here?" Apollo went over and sat on the other cot.

Rubbing his hand through his light hair, Storm answered, "A while. Hard to keep track of time here."

"Weeks, though?"

"Must be three or four. I know it was after I'd heard you'd been lost in action out on Luna One. How'd you get back to Terra anyway?" He sat on his cot, watching the newcomer.

"Not exactly sure, George," said Apollo. "What I have to do, though, is get to the Precedium and fill them in on what's—"

"You don't have a chance," cut in Storm, with a bitter laugh. "Hell, that's why they tossed me in this damn cage."

"You mean you haven't been able to tell them about what went wrong out there? About the destruction on Paradeen and—"

"They don't want that news to reach the people just yet," said Storm. "You know, we've lost Luna One through Eleven to the Eastern Alliance. But here at home, only a few people know and they're not about to make the news public."

"But all that destruction—doesn't the news media report it to—"

"The news media reports only what it's allowed to report. The government has a large staff just to make up stories about what's going on out there, Charlie."

"Why has the fact that the support planets have been destroyed been held back? Seems to me you—"

"The President wants that kept back," answered Storm, clenching his fists. "He knows that if the Precedium found out, they'd immediately throw everything we have against the Eastern Alliance."

"What's wrong with that?"

"It's important to his political health not to get us involved in an all-out war just now," said Storm. "Or so his advisors think. It's a calculated risk he's taking, but he's thinking of his own future as well as the country's."

"How can he keep this from the military?"

"A very tight lid's been put on all reports coming in from out there," replied Storm. "When somebody does get back and try to tell the truth, he ends up in a joint like this. I'd bet there must be a couple dozen military guys like us locked up

in various complexes around the country. We have mental problems, that's what the excuse is."

"Then they may never let us out?"

Storm shrugged. "The President's term has nearly two years to run," he said. "I doubt he can keep this quiet that long, but he's sure going to try."

"Meantime the Eastern Alliance keeps on destroying."

"That's the size of it, Charlie," said Storm, stretching out on the cot. He locked his hands behind his head and looked up at the ceiling.

"John?" said Apollo under his breath. "Are you sure this is what you want me to do? Sit in a cell and count off the days?"

There was no answer from anywhere.

President Arends was a tall, broad-shouldered man. His hair was still a dark black, his eyes were deep-set and wrinkle-rimmed. He sat behind his heavy darkwood desk, holding a sheet of thin yellow paper between his hands. "Well?"

"It's Colonel Watts," said Moore from the chair in front of the big desk. "No doubt about that."

"You've let me down, Art." Arends let go of the memo and watched it flutter down to his desk top.

Moore looked up at the domed ceiling of the windowless Executive Office. "Up until that memo came in from Brace, I thought Watts was safely stored away up on Luna One."

"But he isn't, Art," said the President. "You gave me your word he was up there where he couldn't do us any harm."

"Since the Eastern Alliance attack on Luna One, all information out of there has been a bit sketchy, sir."

"How'd Watts get from there to here?"

"He escaped somehow."

"Escaped? With Eastern Alliance destroyers prowling Luna One, destroying every ship of ours that tries to get back from there?"

Moore decided to meet the President's gaze. "I don't know how he did it," he said finally. "He apparently won't talk about it."

"Let me be perfectly frank with you, Art," said Arends, his blunt fingers drumming on the fallen memo. "I'm disappointed in you. You're supposed to be on my team, helping me keep this whole mess under control."

"It's getting to be an awful large mess, sir," said Moore. "We may not be able to keep the news from—"

"I don't want to hear any more negative talk, Art," the President told him. "How many people know that Charlie Watts is back on Terra?"

"Well, Agent Brace and his partner," said Moore. "Doctor Horning, of course, and a few members of his staff. And the girl who—"

"Which girl is this, Art?"

"Colonel Watt's friend, Brenda Farris. But we can take care of her. There's no—"

"Do that then, Art," he said. "I hate to have to take actions like this, but it's for the good of the nation. Right?"

"It is, yes," agreed Moore. "We determined that long ago."

President Arends picked up the yellow memo once again. "One other thing, Art," he said. "What's this about an unidentified flying craft entering our airspace?"

"I don't believe it's anything serious, sir," replied Moore, looking up at the ceiling. "In fact, neither of the two ships seem to be Eastern Alliance ships, so—"

"Two ships, Art?" The memo fluttered in his hand as he waved it. "I've only been informed of one."

"I'm sure notification of the second sighting is being routed to you at this very moment, sir," said Moore.

"What sort of craft?"

"That hasn't been determined. Small, though, and definitely not EA," Moore said. "Both apparently have landed, at different times, in the forests beyond the city. We've sent a search team out."

"If the Precedium gets the notion this is some kind of scouting party for invaders they'll put even more of our ships up. As it is now they've got our boys up around the clock."

"There's no reason for the Precedium to find out," said Moore.

The President said, "See they don't, Art. And . . ."

"Yes, sir?"

"I'd like to see you keep on playing on my team," the President said. "So, please, don't fumble the ball again."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Late afternoon shadows filled the quiet living room.

Brenda sat in the picturephone alcove, shoulders slumped. "But I know that's where they said they were taking him," she was telling the white-coated paranurse whose image showed on the screen.

"There is no such patient in the Complex infirmary at this time," repeated the chunky, grey-haired woman.

"Watts. Colonel Charles Watts. He must—"

"I suggest you contact the Military Information Service, miss. The number is—"

"Never mind." Brenda broke the connection.

After sitting for a moment, she left the alcove. "It's really starting to look as though I did the wrong thing," she said to herself. "Lord, there's no telling where they took Charlie. I just don't—"

The door hummed.

She went over to the talkhole. "Yes?"

"Me, princess."

Smiling suddenly, she opened the door. "Dad!" she said. "This is . . . I didn't even know where you were and then Charlie came back and . . . everything's turned upside down."

Her father was a lean, dark man in his middle fifties. He wore the uniform of a General. After hugging his daughter, he came into the room and carefully shut the door. "You alone?"

"Now, yes. But—"

"I should have told you what I was up to," he said, walking with his arm around her waist over to the sofa. "Things are

much worse than I imagined."

"I'm beginning to suspect that myself."

They sat side by side.

General Farris said, "I had to leave without telling you, or at least I thought I did. I was on a mission for the Precedium."

"I don't understand what—"

"I didn't understand as much as I thought," said her father. "It appears that President Arends has been lying to us."

Brenda shook her head. "You and he are friends. How—"

"He's become a coward, Brenda," he said. "He used to be a relatively honest man who put his country's best interests first. Now, however, he's become so rattled by public opinion and the war, and his concern to stay in office, that . . . well, he's changed."

"You're sure?"

Nodding forlornly, the General said, "It's the Precedium's suspicion that we have already surrendered every one of Terra's satellite planets. My initial investigations tend to confirm that suspicion."

"How did he imagine he could keep that from us?"

"It's possible he's cracked under the strain," answered her father, shaking his head. "I think he honestly believes that he needn't launch a full-scale war, that we can strike some kind of agreement with the Eastern Alliance."

His daughter asked, "You say you confirmed these suspicions of the Precedium, but do you have actual proof?"

"Nothing concrete, no. But I've put together enough information to convince me—"

"Listen, father," said Brenda, "maybe Charlie isn't crazy after all. He's been trying to tell me the same thing."

"What are you talking about, child?"

"Charlie. He's back."

"Colonel Watts? That's impossible," said General Farris. "I just left the Precidium and if Charlie were here on Terra, he'd have been summoned to the—"

"I thought they knew he was back. I called the security people when I thought he was having some kind of breakdown."

"He was on Luna One when it was attacked. He'd be able to give us proof of what—"

The door didn't buzz this time. It simply snapped open. Agent Brace and two other security men came quickly into the apartment. All were armed.

Brenda jumped to her feet. "He's the man I turned Charlie over to," she said, pointing at Brace. "What did you do with —"

"Good afternoon, General Farris," said Brace, training his pistol on him. "This is quite convenient."

"What the devil is the idea of breaking into my daughter's apartment?" demanded the general, rising angrily off the sofa. "Who gave you any such authorit—"

"These are troubled times, sir." Brace gestured at the open doorway. "I'd like you and your daughter to come with us."

"Where to?"

"To see Colonel Watts," answered Brace.

"Make yourself to home," invited Will/F, his tinny voice echoing some.

They were in a cavelike room that had apparently been dug out of a hillside. Three shadowy corridors led away from it. There was a raw wood plank floor, three cane-bottom chairs, a plastic and metal table. Atop the table rested a portable electric lamp.

Taking his cigar from between his teeth, Starbuck surveyed the big, drafty underground room. "It's not exactly cozy," he observed, "but for a hideout it's not too bad. What's all that stuff over against the wall there?"

"Don't go poking into that," cautioned the robot as Starbuck went over to the cluster of electronic equipment. "That there's Mr. Snell's. He don't cotton to folks—"

"Nonsense, William. We mustn't be inhospitable." A small pudgy man in a rumpled yellow suit had emerged from one of the tunnels. "Good day, sir. I'm Snell."

"Starbuck." He pointed at the gear. "Looks to me like you got a primitive scanning system included here. Can you check various points in the city for—"

"Primitive, sir?" The tufts of cottony hair over his out-thrust ears quivered. "Why, this is the most advanced scanning and tracking outfit you'll find on the whole blinking planet." Snell approached his equipment, flicked a speck of dust off one of the terminal screens.

"Starbuck here ain't from Terra," explained the robot, "so he's used to some mighty fancy junk."

"Indeed?" Snell looked the lieutenant up and down, his scrutinizing gaze lingering on the holstered lasergun and then the communicator in his left hand. "You do seem to be sporting some rather unusual—"

"Trouble," announced a partly choked-up voice. "It's coming. Big trouble. Wow boy."

"Hush, Sue," advised Will/F.

A thin, dark-haired young woman, wearing loose work trousers, a knitted man's jacket and a polkadot scarf, came over to them from out of another tunnel. "You're Lieutenant Starbuck," she said to him. "From the Battlestar *Galactica*, whatever that is exactly. You're anxious to find Captain Apollo."

He took a step back from the girl. "You must be Longsight Sue."

"I am," she said.

"Sue gets hunches and such," said Will/F. "That's mostly how come she up and run off from the city awhile back to set up with us renegades. If you got second sight and all, it can cut up mighty rough for—"

"I can do my own complaining," cut in Sue. She fetched a blue bandana out of her coat pocket and blew her nose. "Only thing I don't like about these caves is I'm allergic to dampness. It was you I was alluding to a moment ago, Starbuck. You're the one, for certain, who's heading into lots of trouble."

"You just sensed that?"

"Yes." She rubbed at her high forehead. "Certain important people don't want your friend to tell what he knows."

"Knows about what?"

Giving a disappointed shake of her head, Sue answered, "I don't know . . . yet."

"How about me? Am I going to—"

"You'll find him okay. But . . . Nope, no use. I can't see beyond that right now."

Starbuck glanced from Longsight Sue to Snell. "What I have to do is zero in on exactly where Apollo is," he told them. "This communicator of mine is picking up a signal from his. Snell, can you use your equipment to pinpoint his exact whereabouts?"

"Nothing to it." He held out one pudgy hand. "Let me have a look at that communicator."

Starbuck handed it over to him. "I have to get to him soon as—"

"The Complex," said Sue all at once.

Will/F whistled. "Is that where this Apollo feller is?"

"Yes."

"A wild surmise at best." Snell seated himself at a keyboard. "Instead of blurting out unsubstantiated guesses, dear Susan, try to be as unobtrusive as possible while I get the lieutenant an accurate location for—"

"Wow boy, I can sure see why they bounced you out of City Tech," the dark-haired young woman remarked. "I mean, a *good* teacher doesn't always ridicule other points of—"

"Hey, folks," said Starbuck, holding both hands up in a let's-quit-this gesture, "I didn't come all this way to referee a debate. What's this Complex you mentioned, Susie?"

"Heck, that's whereat I used to work," Will/F said. "Before I discovered how to—"

"It is also the place," the girl said to Starbuck, "where you're going to have a good part of your trouble."

"If Apollo is there," said Starbuck with a nod at Snell's broad back, "can you show me a quick and sneaky way to get in there, Will?"

"Shucks, getting in the Complex ain't no problem. That there's easier'n spitting in a creek," the robot said. "What's a real bugger, though, is getting out again."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"I ought not to be doing this," said Doctor Horning as they approached the door to Apollo's cell.

"You ought not to be locking me up," said General Farris. "That's what you should be concerned about."

"I only work here. If I don't follow—

"Yes, yes, that's what they all say. But every man is responsible for—"

"I used to believe that," said the doctor, halting before the cell door and glancing nervously up and down the empty corridor, "a long time ago." After another cautious look around, he used his special keycard to unlock the door. "You can see Colonel Watts for five minutes, General, and then I'm going to have to return you to your own cell. I really shouldn't even be allowing you this—"

"Stand aside, so I can go in." Farris reached for the door handle.

"Now, be prepared to leave sooner, in case someone comes along this—"

"You really must learn to relax, Doctor."

Farris strode into the cell. "Well, damn," he exclaimed when he spotted Apollo, "it really is you, Charlie."

Apollo stood up. "I'm afraid I don't—"

"He's having some memory problems, General Farris," explained Storm.

"Farris?" said Apollo. "Are you related to Brenda?"

The general was scowling. "What the hell have they been doing to you, my boy? Don't you even remember that I'm Brenda's father?"

"Actually, I—"

"Wait a minute," cut in Storm, moving closer to the general. "We can talk this all over later. You did come to get us out of here, didn't you?"

Shaking his head, Farris replied, "I'm afraid not. Brenda and I are prisoners, just like you two."

"Brenda as well?" said Apollo. "But she's the one who turned me in."

"She thought they were going to help you, Charlie," the general told him. "The child had no idea you'd be locked away like this."

"Why have they grabbed you?"

"Because our President is running scared. He doesn't want anyone who knows the true situation out in the satellite planets to talk."

Storm said, "Hell, he's going to have to keep locking up an awful lot of people."

"Unless he comes to his senses darn soon." The general put a hand on Apollo's shoulder. "My boy, I don't have much time. I had to bully that fool Horning to give me a few minutes with you before locking me up. What I want to know is this . . . if I can manage to get word to the Precedium, will you testify as to the real conditions out there?"

"You bet I will," Apollo assured him. "That's why I came to Terra in the first place."

"I was certain I could count on Charlie Watts."

"It might do your cause more good," suggested Apollo, "if I testified as myself."

"As yourself? What are—"

Three anxious taps on the door interrupted him. The door swung open a fraction. "That's all the time I can give you, General. Sorry," said Doctor Horning. "We must go."

"But—"

"If we're caught here, it'll mean trouble for all of us."

Farris studied Apollo's face for a few seconds. "Try to pull yourself together, my boy." Turning, he left him.

"Hot dang!" observed Will/F. "If that there ain't a sight and a half."

He and Starbuck, with the robot in the lead, were traveling along an abandoned subway tunnel. Each held a short lightstick.

"What are you hooting about now?" inquired the lieutenant, catching up with his mechanical guide.

"I was merely remarking on that dapper feller up yonder. He sure manages to keep right spic and span . . . and it's almost like he's glowing some."

"What fellow?" Starbuck swept the tunnel ahead with the beam of his stick. "I don't see any . . . whoops!"

"We do meet in the oddest places, don't we, Starbuck?" John came drifting out of the darkness toward them. His suit did seem to be glowing faintly. "I assume you're planning some violence, eh?"

"I . . . I think I remember you from . . . before . . ." Starbuck, cigar drooping, was frowning as he tried to remember.

"Try hard, it'll come back to you."

"You travel in a . . . ship of lights . . . belong to an advanced race," recalled Starbuck, the memory blurred still. "Yeah, and you thrive on butting into other people's business."

"We have a parental interest in the less fortunate," said John. "Like all thoughtful and caring parents, our efforts are sometimes misunderstood by our childish—"

"Hey!" Starbuck took his cigar from between his teeth and pointed it accusingly at John. "I suddenly understand what

Apollo was getting at in that message he left me. About being involved in something I wasn't going to believe. You're behind this, aren't you?"

"I'm taking an interest in a dangerous situation that might well—"

"Yeah, you dragged Apollo here, right in the middle of an important mission so—"

"Starbuck, Starbuck," said John patiently, "when are you going to realize that you really have no idea of what's important and what isn't in this universe? Part of wisdom is learning to accept the wise counsel of—"

"You may be wise as heck, but all I see is a guy in a white suit who's kidnaped my buddy and brought him into some screwball situation," said Starbuck, jabbing at the chill tunnel air with his cigar. "Did you know, old chum, that they've tossed Apollo into the jug more or less?"

"Of course I know that. Why do you think I'm here to brief you on—"

"What did you con him into doing this time?" demanded Starbuck.

John raised a placating hand. "Listen to me for a moment," he requested. "Unless the situation that's been building up on this planet is altered very soon, the two major powers will destroy each other."

"What do you mean by very soon?"

"Right now it's a matter of hours."

"Doggone," said Will/F, who'd been quietly drinking in the conversation. "This is dang exciting."

John gave him a disdainful glance. "Can you hear me?"

"Heck yes. See you, too. Ain't I supposed to?"

John sighed. "I assumed only Starbuck was aware of me. I don't like to have a lot of rustic primitives ogling me when I

—"

"Oh, shucks, John," said the robot. "I ain't no primitive at all. Listen, heck, the way I modified myself, I'm near about your equal in the smart department."

John couldn't refrain from letting his nose wrinkle slightly. "I doubt that."

"Hey, later on you guys can have a wrestling match to decide," put in the impatient Starbuck. "Right now, John, you're supposed to be telling me what's going on."

"We want to avert an all-out destructive war on Terra that would destroy a good portion of the population," he said. "Having, as is usual in an emergency situation, to work with the materials at hand, I recruited Apollo. He's volunteered to —"

"Oh, sure, I just bet he volunteered."

"He's obliged me by coming to my aid," said John. "After all, it's to your advantage, too, to keep these fools from destroying each other."

"Okay, maybe so," conceded Starbuck. "But how does Apollo bring that off while sitting in the jug?"

"You get him out and help him get to the Precedium, which is the governing body in this part of the world. Simple." He smiled and spread his hands wide.

"You planned all this from the start? Knew it would go like this?"

John said, "In any game there are bound to be unexpected variations now and then. Which is why I'm compelled to intercede directly at certain intervals so that—"

"A game? This is a game to you?"

"In a way, yes," he admitted. "But perhaps that was an unfortunate word to use with someone as hot-tempered as you, Starbuck."

"Hot-tempered?" He took three steps toward the man in the white suit. "What gave you the idea I was hot-tempered?"

Smiling, John said, "I'll let you get on with your rescue mission. Try, though, to keep the gore and bloodshed down to a minimum."

"Are you trying to tell me how to . . . John?"

He simply wasn't there anymore.

"Wowee," exclaimed the robot, whistling out of his ears. "That there feller puts on some show, don't he now? Friend of yours, is he?"

"Not exactly," answered Starbuck.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Fingers steepled and chin resting on fingertips, Commander Adama sat in a comfortable chair in his quarters. "So they're starting up again already, are they?"

"It was to be expected," said Siress Tinia.

Lowering his hands, Adama rested them on his knees. "And what exactly does the Council intend to do?"

"Mutter and complain," she answered, smiling. "For now, anyway."

The commander nodded. "There's some precedent for that."

"They're very upset about your taking the *Galactica* away from the fleet. The majority feeling is that you're making an error, possibly a grave one."

"Is that the unanimous feeling?"

She smiled again. "You must realize I don't agree with my colleagues on this, Adama, or I wouldn't be here."

"I appreciate that."

"Many of them feel that approaching so near to a planet like Terra may put the battlestar in a dangerous position," she told him. "I tried to convince them that—"

"The Council may be quite right," he said quietly. "We really can't be sure what we'll have to face."

"Yet you're going?"

"Apollo and Starbuck are in serious trouble, at least that's my assumption," he said. "Apollo's my son, but I see it as my duty to back up all our warriors. There's a risk to the battlestar, certainly. Being commander of the *Galactica*, however, means I have to calculate the risks, weigh the dangers against the possible results."

Tinia said, "I have a good deal of faith in your—"

A speaker announced, "Colonel Tigh to see you."

"Admit him," instructed Adama.

The black colonel came into the room, a sheaf of papers in his hand. "Commander, Siress," he said, bowing slightly. "We've just determined, sir, that the two vipers are actually on Terra. They apparently landed there."

"Anything as to why?"

"Nothing," answered the colonel. "In one centare we'll be within striking distance of the planet. Do you wish to reduce speed?"

"No," said Commander Adama. "Continue at light speed."

Will/F whispered, "There'll be two of 'em 'round the next bend in this here corridor."

"Armed?"

"You bet your butt, Starbuck. A rifle each, the kind that kill you graveyard dead right off."

Easing his pistol out of the holster, Starbuck told him, "Okay, you go on up to these guards and distract them. I sneak up in a jiffy and stun 'em."

"They might shoot me."

"So? You're made out of metal."

"Even so, it might put holes in my carcass. I don't cotton to having no unsightly holes perforating my—"

"They won't have time to perforate you," Starbuck assured him. "Trust me."

"Oh, shucks, I do. Sincerely. But—"

"G'wan."

After bobbing his ball of a head twice, the robot trotted off along the shadowy underground corridor.

"Halt!" ordered the first guard who noticed him.

There were two of them, grey-uniformed, stationed in front of a wide metal door in a pale green wall.

"Wowee," exclaimed Will/F as he went shuffling closer to the guards. "I surely must've took me a wrong turning. I'm looking for the Rapid Transit subcar train to East—"

"Hands in the air!" commanded the other guard.

Both rifles were trained on the robot.

"Hey now," said Will/F. "There ain't no need to get all in a sweat, fellers. Just a small mistake. Surely, I bet you I know exactly what happened. I bet you one of my directional tubes is on the fritz and so I—"

"Step over here to us," said a guard. "Keep those hands up."

"I'm starting in to suspect you fellers don't work for the Rapid Transit at all," said the mechanical man. "Nope, your uniforms ain't the right color and your attitude ain't the usual combination of courtesy and amiability one comes to associate with Rapid—"

"What are you doing here? This is an entry to a government building."

"No kidding? Don't that beat all. Here I thought I was—"

Starbuck fired his pistol, twice, set to stun.

Before either of the guards could turn his attention to the lieutenant, they were tumbling over.

"You sure as heck took your own sweet time about springing into action, Starbuck," said the robot, lowering his metallic hands and glancing back at the approaching lieutenant. "I must've sweat me about a gallon of—"

"Robots don't sweat."

"I was speaking metaphorically."

Stepping across the fallen bodies of the stunned and unconscious guards, Starbuck pointed at the door. "This leads to the section of the Complex that we want?"

"Heck yes. Didn't I already explain all that to you? Once you used that there communicator of yours to get the exact location of your pal, I called on my vast and intimate knowledge of the Complex to pick us the best sneaky route in."

"Okay," said Starbuck. "How many other guards are we likely to encounter before we reach Apollo's cell?"

"Heck, it's going to be a snap from here on," said the robot. "I don't guess we got to overcome more than fifteen or twenty guards."

Storm tapped his plastic spoon lightly against the edge of the plastic meal tray resting across his knees. "I've been kicking an odd notion around in my head," he said.

Apollo was leaning, arms folded, against the cell wall. His meal tray, the food untouched, was sitting atop his cot. "This is a good place for odd notions."

"When General Farris was here, you started to tell him something," said Storm. "You were going to explain that you aren't really Charlie Watts, weren't you?"

Apollo unfolded his arms. "Yep, I was."

After watching him for a moment Storm went on. "I'm starting to believe you really aren't Charlie Watts at all. At first I figured you were acting funny because these bastards had shot you full of drugs or something."

"They didn't."

"Now, though, I can see another explanation. Namely, that you don't know things that Charlie would know because you aren't Charlie."

"Congratulations. You're starting to think logically."

"Who are you, then?"

"My name's Apollo."

Storm dropped his fork onto his tray. It made a faint click.

"Apollo, huh? Where do you come from, what planet?"

"I don't reside on a planet. I live on an immense spaceship called a battlestar."

"Never heard of anything like—"

"We're new to your part of the universe."

"Why are you here at all? Are you the front runner for some kind of invasion team from—"

"Nothing like that, no," Apollo said quickly.

"Then what?"

"I'm not here completely by choice. Let's just say I was sort of persuaded to volunteer for this job."

"What job? Getting yourself locked up?"

"The job is to get certain information to your Precedium."

Storm shook his head. "Doesn't look like you'll make it."

"It's much too early to give up," Apollo told him. "The people I'm working for are pretty good at getting their way."

"So you expect to get free of here?"

"Eventually."

"How?"

"That's the part," admitted Apollo, "I don't know as yet."

A guard spun on his heel, went running for the nearest alarm box on the wall.

"Better stop that there gent from pulling that red lever," warned Will/F, who was crouched beside Starbuck in the corridor leading to the cell they were seeking.

Starbuck fired his stun-set pistol.

The beam hit the guard in the middle of his back and he went spreadeagle in midair. He seemed to float there for an instant before dropping to the ribbed metal floor.

Straightening, Starbuck surveyed the narrow hallway. "You underestimated, old chum," he said as he lowered his weapon. "That last makes twenty-three guards encountered so far."

"According to my figures, Starbuck, it's twenty-four. And that feller ought to be the last for a while."

Starbuck skirted the two unconscious guards sprawled near his feet. "Apollo should be in one of these cells coming up on the right."

"That one numbered 232 if our calculations are right," said the robot, walking along with him.

"Then let's us get him the heck out of here fast." The lieutenant stopped in front of the door he wanted. "A couple dozen guards asleep on the job is going to attract attention pretty soon."

"I can pick this here lock easy as heck," offered the robot. "Got me a special tool for just such a task built right into the pinkie of my left hand." He held up that hand.

"This is quicker." Starbuck reset his pistol and fired at the lock.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Apollo had gotten up from his cot. "You hear a noise?"

"Nope. What sort of noise?" asked Storm.

"A thump, out in the corridor. Sounded like something falling over."

"Probably they're just escorting another guest to his suite."

"Yeah, I suppose that—"

The area around the lock was starting to glow a fiery orange.

"Stand back," suggested a voice from out in the corridor.

The now lockless door came rattling open.

"Starbuck to the rescue," announced the lieutenant.

"I'll be darned," said Apollo, smiling. "Never thought I'd be glad to see you, old buddy, but—"

"Save the tearful reunion stuff for another day," Starbuck said, crossing the threshold. "Gather up your belongings and let us depart. Who's your roommate?"

"George Storm, this is Starbuck."

"Pleasure," muttered Starbuck. "You want to join us on this flit, Storm?"

"Yeah, getting out of here sounds appealing."

"Time's awasting, Starbuck," reminded Will/F from outside.

"New associate of mine. Not as cute as you, Apollo, but smarter." He pointed at the robot with his thumb. "A renegade who has an intimate knowledge of this joint."

Apollo hurried to the doorway. "We have a couple more people to break loose before we can go."

"Listen, this isn't universal amnesty day, chum," Starbuck told him, biting hard on his cigar. "There isn't time enough to—"

"Which cell would General Farris and his daughter be likely to be in?" Apollo asked Storm.

"Only vacancy was 237. That's most likely where they put them."

"C'mon." Apollo sprinted to cell 237. "Use your gun on this lock, Starbuck."

"I suppose eventually, when you're weary of ordering me around, you'll find time to thank me for this daring rescue."

"Sure," said Apollo, "thanks."

Brenda had been sitting, hands folded, on the edge of the cot. "You have the same feeling about him, father?"

"Yes," answered the general. "There's definitely something different about Charlie."

"And that uniform he's wearing is . . . well, it's not like anything I've ever seen," the young woman went on.

"You say he told you he wasn't Charlie Watts?"

"When I first picked him up out beyond the city, yes. He acted as though he'd never seen me before. Yet he'd called me to . . . But, no, I'm not at all sure if he's the one who phoned me."

"What do you mean, princess?" The general was standing near the door, in an at-ease position.

"I was asleep when the call came, so I was a little fuzzy anyway," she answered. "And the phonescreen stayed blank. All I heard was a voice. 'This is Charlie, I'm in trouble. Come get me . . . ' Then directions on how to reach him."

"But it wasn't Charlie?"

"I don't think so." She shook her head. "And it wasn't this man who may or may not be Charlie. The voice was . . . strange . . . unusual."

"Yet you went."

"Yes, because . . . at the time . . . there was something about the voice . . . I just automatically believed him. Whoever he was."

"But who else could've known where Charlie was?"

"I have no idea."

"There's something strange about all this," said her father slowly and thoughtfully. "As though we're dealing with some kind of entity that we can't quite . . . Wait! Stay right there."

The handle of their cell door had begun to glow and shimmer.

A moment later the door opened.

Starbuck, gun in hand and cigar tilted at a jaunty angle, was grinning in at them. "I can see why you'd want to save the lass, Apollo," he said over his shoulder. "The old boy, though, doesn't look like he's worth the—"

"Your uniform," said Brenda, "it's just like his . . . like Charlie's."

"Charlie?"

Apollo stepped into the cell. "Brenda, we're going to get you and your father out of here. Let's move."

The young woman took hold of his arm, allowed him to guide her clear of the cell.

General Farris, frowning deeply, followed. "Who are you, young man?" he asked Starbuck as he brushed by him.

"Just a freelance jailbreaker."

"You're a bit too flippant."

Starbuck took a puff on his dead cigar. "Would you be surprised to learn that you're not the first person to mention

that?" he asked. "Now, if you'll fall in behind my robot buddy, we'll get your butt to safety."

"Heck, I know a dandy place," said Will/F.

The party was making its way along a snaking underground tunnel.

Starbuck and the robot were leading, followed by Apollo, Brenda and the general. Storm brought up the rear.

"A safe place?" asked Starbuck.

"Shucks, you already been there, Starbuck. It's our hideaway in—"

"Yeah, but I don't know if—"

"What's he talking about?" asked Apollo, moving up next to the lieutenant.

"A safe location for you folks to hole up while you're making plans and such," explained Will/F. "I heard you and the general gabbing about needing a base of operations."

"Brenda's place isn't safe. Neither is the general's," said Apollo. "They'll obviously look for us there."

"They ain't got any idea our hideout even exists."

"What we want to do is set up a meeting with the Precedium," said Apollo. "Can we contact them from there?"

"Sure enough, Apollo. Mr. Snell built us our own private phone system. Oh, the images get a mite fuzzy now and then. Heck, though, considering we don't pay no phone bill, why, it's a beaut."

Apollo asked Starbuck, "You've been there? What sort of a building is it?"

"Not a building, a cave."

"Cave?"

"Nothing fancy, mind you," said the robot. "Secure and safe, that's for sure. Nobody'll ever find you there."

Apollo came to a decision. "Okay, that's where we'll go"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"It's my own design," said Snell proudly, gesturing at the picturephone sitting on a lopsided crate against one wall of the cave.

"Somewhat unorthodox in appearance," observed General Farris, "but if I can use it to contact the Precidium and set up a meeting, that's fine."

"It works better than most phones you're used to," Snell informed him. "Sit yourself down on that barrel there, General, and give it a try."

Starbuck was a few yards from the scene, puffing absently on his stogie.

Someone tapped his elbow.

"Huh?"

Longsight Sue had moved up close to him. "Got something to tell you," she whispered.

"Go ahead."

"Let's move over against the wall."

"Okay." He linked arms with her and they crossed the earthen floor. "What is it, Susie?"

"I . . . sense something."

"Another hunch, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Well, you were right about the Complex. Lots of guys tried to make trouble for me there, but—"

"You're in danger again. All of you."

"You mean because the military folks from the Complex are hunting for us? I don't think there's much chance they'll pick up our—"

"Not that," she said, taking hold of his arm. "I'm . . . getting a message that . . . someone is going to . . . betray you."

Starbuck looked into her thin face. "Someone here?"

She brushed a lock of stray hair back under her head scarf. "I'm sorry I can't get a clearer impression . . . but I am sure someone here with us is going to cause you trouble. Tell them where you are . . ."

"One of your gang, one of mine?"

"Can't be sure."

"You ought to work on polishing these visions, Susie. Get 'em into focus so—"

"You're making fun of me."

"Nope, no," he assured her. "Just wishing you could give me more details."

Her grip on his arm tightened. "He . . . he's going to send a message to them, tell them you're here with us," Sue said. "That'll foul us up, too."

"He? So it's not Brenda."

"She's not the one, no."

"How about the general? He's supposed to be calling the Precedium on your homemade phone, but he might be—"

"I . . . I don't know if it's him or not."

Starbuck glanced away from the girl and noticed Storm step into the mouth of one of the tunnels.

Storm had his hand slipped in under his tunic, clutching something.

"Stay here, Sue." Starbuck broke away from her. "I want to follow up a hunch of my own."

Starbuck's stroll across the cavern looked casual. He even paused to relight his cigar, although it was already burning. When he was near the mouth of the tunnel, he ducked in.

He whipped out his lightstick, clicked it on and sprayed the beam.

Storm was crouched a dozen yards in, some kind of voice communicator in his hand. "This is how to get to the place," he was saying. "They're hiding in a—"

"Show's over, old chum." Starbuck went galloping across the rocky floor, and, without even breaking his stride, booted the communicator clean out of Storm's grip.

The gadget cracked into the wall, squawked, hit the floor, bounced twice and cracked in half.

"Damn it." Starbuck swept the crouching figure with his light. "Here I risk my neck to save you and you turn out to be a fake. A spy planted to pump Apollo."

"You're misunderstanding what you just saw me doing and —"

"I suppose you were really broadcasting weather reports to the banana growers in the area?"

"Look, I'm on your side, Starbuck. I was locked up just like the rest of—"

"Heck, you were planted. Oldest trick in the world." He spit out a fleck of tobacco. "Good thing I got to you before you—"

"We can work out some . . ."

Storm suddenly lunged, grabbing up a stone from underfoot. He charged at Starbuck, striving to club him. The lieutenant backed, kicked out again. This time the toe of his boot connected with the man's chin. Storm groaned, staggered, stumbled into the wall, fell and passed out.

Starbuck was about to bend over him, but he spun around instead. "Don't . . . Oh, hello, Susie m'love."

"You okay?"

"Tip top," he replied. "And, say, that was a pretty good hunch you had."

"They often are," she admitted.

General Farris stepped away from the makeshift phone systems. "We'll meet with the Precedium in one hour at their central headquarters," he announced.

"That ain't all that far from here," said the robot. "You'll have plenty of time to sneak over."

The general added, "The President will be there, too."

"He'll deny everything," said Brenda, "accuse us all of being crazy or traitors. We really, you know, can't prove any of this."

The general turned to Apollo. "Charlie . . . Apollo . . . You're the only one who's actually been out there," he said. "You were on Paradeen, you saw what the Eastern Alliance did."

"I intend to tell them everything we know," said Apollo.

Brenda was shaking her head. "They may not believe him," she pointed out. "All President Arends has to do is say that this man is Colonel Charles Watts. Charlie has suffered a complete mental breakdown and thinks he's somebody named Captain Apollo from another system. Just more proof that he's a madman."

"He might try that," acknowledged her father.

"Not," offered Starbuck, "if we give them a little tangible proof that we're what we say we are."

"Such as?" asked Apollo.

"Our ships, the vipers," said the lieutenant. "Nobody on this planet builds anything like that. If I was to fly over this Precedium headquarters building in my viper, do a few stunts, that'd—"

"Good idea," said Apollo. "And maybe we can also contact the *Galactica*. Get them to put on some kind of show of power or strength."

"What's the *Galactica*?" Brenda wanted to know.

"Maybe we can show you," said Starbuck. "Apollo, old chum, you go to the meeting. I'll fetch a viper from out in the woodland glade where I . . . oops! Maybe the ships ain't there no more."

Apollo's grin faded. "Right, the lawmen may have confiscated 'em."

Starbuck looked over at Longsight Sue. "Any hunches, love?"

The thin young woman pressed the fingertips of her right hand to her forehead. "I . . . I can see the two craft," she said slowly. "Still where you landed them . . . but . . ."

Starbuck gave an impatient chomp on his stogie. "But what?"

"There are three guards watching your ships."

"Only three?" He snapped his fingers. "No problem. C'mon, Willie. Let's go fetch a viper."

The robot's head bobbed. "You other folks can get to the Precedium okay if I don't guide you?"

"I'll do that," volunteered Sue, adjusting her head scarf.

Rubbing his metal hands together, Will/F said, "Then let's us get a move on, Starbuck."

No one but Apollo saw him.

John, white suit faintly glowing, appeared on the far side of the cavern.

While the general and his daughter talked about the upcoming meeting with the Precedium, Apollo eased away and crossed over.

"Now what?" he asked him.

John said, "You've been doing quite well, all things considered."

"Thanks. Did you drop in just to congratulate me?"

"No, I brought you some news," John said. "Not very good news, I fear."

Apollo took a deep breath before asking, "What's wrong now?"

"The Eastern Alliance is voting, even as we speak, on a surprise strike against these people."

"Missile attack?"

"Yes," said John, nodding. "If that happens, this nation will automatically launch a counterattack."

"Won't that destroy most of the planet?"

"Yes."

"Then they ought to have more sense than to—"

"Sense and politics don't often go hand in hand."

"How much time do we have?"

"Possibly no more than a few hours."

"That may be time enough," said Apollo.

"You have a plan?"

"You wouldn't have popped in here if you hadn't expected me to, John, old buddy."

"True." He smiled and vanished.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Will/F raised his head up above the protecting wall of brush. "Three of 'em," he announced as he ducked back down next to Starbuck. "Two got rifles, third gent's merely wearing a little old pistol in his holster. Imagine he's the head cheese, seeing as how he's sitting on a stump while them other two is standing stiff and straight front of your vipers."

The lieutenant double-checked his pistol, making sure it was set at the stun position. "You up to creating another small diversion?"

"Sure thing, I get a kick out of that. But don't leave me standing around yacking so long this time, huh?"

"A promise."

The robot gave Starbuck an encouraging punch on the upper arm, then started away from him.

His further progress through the woods was no longer quiet and surreptitious.

Will/F's feet clanged on the sward, his elbows made the underbrush rattle, his ball head agitated dangling vines.

"Hold it right there, mister!" called out the uniformed lawman with the pistol when the covered robot came stomping into the clearing. He left his stump, drawing his weapon.

"Well, I swan. Ain't this something and a half." Putting hands on hips, Will/F pretended to give the two vipers an awed look.

"What're you doing here?" The officer stalked closer to the robot.

"Getting me a close look at these here flying machines," explained Will/F. "Danged if they ain't everything I heard tell

they was and then some. Yessir, I'm glad I come to get a gander for myself so—"

"Who told you these ships were here, mister?"

The robot scratched at his fur cap. "You know, that's a dang good question. Don't go hollering at me for a spell and I'll see can I remember," he said. "Now, I know it weren't Grandma Malley over to—"

"Never mind. Just get the . . . hey!"

He'd heard the hum of Starbuck's stun beam and turned just in time to see his two subordinates go flopping over onto the grass.

"What the heck's going on here?"

"Oh, shucks, ain't you figured that out yet," said the robot. "You're being ambushed."

"Ambushed?" He was facing the vipers, but didn't see Starbuck as the pistol hummed again.

The beam took him in the lower chest. His arms flapped out once, and he gurgled and collapsed.

"I'll admit you was faster that time, Starbuck, but you still took a heck of a time getting—"

"I had to crawl on my belly." Starbuck holstered his gun. "I'm not exactly used to that means of transportation and it . . . Oh, for pete's sake."

"Doggone, if it ain't the feller in the shiny suit."

John had appeared next to Starbuck's viper. "I suggest you turn on the communication unit in your ship, young man."

"Why?"

"Apollo is most anxious to talk with you."

As Starbuck went climbing into his ship, he inquired, "Something else wrong?"

"This whole planet may be on the brink of a disastrous war."

"Oh," said Starbuck, "is that all?"

President Arends was staring out the tinted, bulletproof side window of his hovercraft, watching the city unroll below him. "Tell me this again, Art," he requested.

Moore was sitting next to him on the rear passenger seat of the Presidential craft. "We have to expect that General Farris will have this fake Charlie Watts address the Precedium."

"You're sure, now, he isn't Colonel Watts?"

"Not according to what Storm reported to me from—"

"You think Storm is dead, by the way?"

"We don't know yet. All communication broke off before we could get a fix on his position."

"I don't like to pick on you, Art, but I think you messed up there," said the President, stroking his chin. "Had we been able to capture them back before—"

"Storm is a good man and—"

"Was a good man. He's not any more, whether he's dead or alive."

"Was good, then," said Moore. "They simply tumbled to him somehow. At any rate, he learned that the fellow's real name is Apollo."

"Odd name. Couldn't it be that he's Watts and just plain goofy?"

"We only said he was crazy so as to have an excuse to lock him away, remember? There's no real evidence he's unbalanced at all."

The President narrowed one eye. "Okay, so Farris introduces him to the Precedium and then what?"

"He'll tell them what he knows. That our bases on places like Paradeen have long since been destroyed."

"Still, he's an alien, Art, and it's his word against mine. I'm the President after all and—"

"This is an alien being presented to them by Farris," reminded Moore. "The general is very popular with the Precedium gang."

"We can label Farris a traitor, say he's sold out to the—"

"They won't buy that. Not without a heck of a lot of proof. Which we don't have the time to manufacture."

The President was scowling. "How am I going to win them over, then?"

"Maybe," suggested Moore, "you might offer them the truth and—"

"The truth? Are you out of your mind, Art? I can no more —"

"Not the whole truth . . . merely an edited version," said Moore. "Then spring the treaty idea."

"I was saving that for my Fireside Chat telecast next—"

"You don't have much choice."

"I guess I don't."

The hovercraft was dropping down toward the landing area atop the massive grey Precedium building.

"What?" General Farris was staring at Apollo, face pale. They were in a small grey waiting room behind the Central Assembly Hall.

"There's a strong possibility," repeated the captain, "that the Eastern Alliance will be launching an all-out missile attack on you within the next few hours."

The general asked, "How do you know this, young man?"

"Let's just say I got it from a reliable source."

"If that happens," said Brenda, "our own missiles will automatically be launched in retaliation. There's no hope to avert—"

"There's a hope," Apollo told them, "if the *Galactica* is as close to Terra as I think it is."

"And," asked the general, "if it isn't?"

"Well, it's been nice knowing you," replied Apollo.

Will/F held out his metallic hand. "Good luck to you, Starbuck," he said. "You reckon as how you can do it?"

"The *Galactica* is out there, according to my instruments," he said as they shook hands. "Once I get clear of Terra I'll be able to get into voice communication with the battlestar."

"And they can stop this missile attack?"

Starbuck hopped up into his cockpit. "Willie, the *Galactica's* got enough laserguns mounted on her to stop two or three all-out missile wars."

"Dang, that's something, ain't it?" He whistled. "Good thing Apollo thought of that and got in touch with you."

"I would've thought of it myself, old chum, once I heard what was going to happen." He settled into his seat. "Got to shut the hatch now."

The robot stepped back. "Been right nice hanging round with you, Starbuck."

"Same here."

"Don't imagine we'll ever meet up again, but . . . well, heck, you better get going."

"Hey, you're not Longsight Sue. You don't know if we'll meet again or not," Starbuck told him. "I'm betting we will. See you around, buddy."

He threw a switch and the hatch cover whapped shut.

The viper engine roared to life a few seconds later, the ship's sleek little body quivering.

The robot scurried farther away and stopped at the edge of the clearing.

Starbuck's ship wooshed up from the ground, climbed clear of the treetops and then went zooming away from there.

"Good thing I ain't a human," reflected Will/F. "Or I'd bust out in tears. And that ain't manly at all."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The Chairman of the Precedium sat at a wide desk on an oval dais at the front of the enormous domed hall. The members of the governing group, some hundred and fifty of them, filled the tiers of seats that rose up from the dais.

The Chairman was a lean black man of about fifty. He tapped his gavel for silence as General Farris, Brenda and Apollo entered the vast room and took chairs on the dais to his left. President Arends and Moore were already seated at his right.

"We've called this special emergency session," the Chairman began, "because of some very serious allegations made by General Farris. Since the general is a highly respected member of the military, his charges deserve a serious hearing. General?"

Before Farris could rise and cross to the podium next to the desk, the President was on his feet.

"Mr. Chairman," he said, walking to the podium. "I believe I can save us a great deal of time if I—"

"Mr. President, you are out of order, sir," reminded the Chairman.

"Perhaps, but—"

"I must request that you await your turn, sir."

Arends was at the podium now. "I merely wished to say that I am aware that General Farris has accused me of withholding information from you all about the satellites which provide our food and fuel. He will tell you that they have been attacked and, in some cases, destroyed," he said. "There is some truth to his charges."

There was a considerable murmur rising from the members of the Precedium. Almost all of the exclamations were ones

of surprise and anger.

The Chairman tapped his gavel again. "General Farris, will you step to the podium, please?"

Farris obliged and was standing next to Arends.

The general took hold of the mike handle and tilted it toward him. "Since the President has seen fit to discuss one of my charges, I'll address myself to that one first also," he said. "Yes, I have proof that he has been keeping back the truth from us for some time now. Our bases on the Luna satellites as well as the one on Paradeen have all been wiped out by attacks of the Eastern Alliance. Not one word of this has been allowed to reach us."

The angry murmurs were growing louder, echoing in the hollow hall.

The President straightened his broad shoulders, held up a hand for silence. "Although the situation is not quite as black as the general paints it," he said, "there have, indeed, been some attacks and considerable losses. You know me well enough to be certain that my main concern is for the people of this land of ours. I firmly believe that premature word of our enemy's attacks would prompt our generals to demand massive retaliation and—"

"It certainly would have," cut in General Farris. "And that's the only sound way to counter a—"

"No, my dear general, a counterattack would only have increased the devastation on both sides," said the President. He reached inside his coat and, slowly, extracted several folded sheets of crisp white paper. "I have kept certain facts from you, my most respected colleagues, because I thought the greater good of our nation demanded it. I have, for many long and grueling weeks, been in constant secret negotiations with the Eastern Alliance." He held the sheets of paper high. "And I am pleased to announce that we are

very near to signing this treaty. A treaty, my friends, which calls for an immediate halt to all hostilities."

There was a moment of stunned silence and then the members of the Precedium began to applaud the President.

"They'll never honor a treaty," said the general. "In fact . . ."

The shouting and applause killed his words.

The viper was rocketing swiftly away from the planet.

Starbuck lit a fresh cigar and prepared to try to contact the *Galactica*.

His scanners had already informed him that the battlestar was approaching Terra at light speed.

"Good thing I set my emergency beacon back then," he reflected, "or otherwise . . . Hey, no stowaways."

John had materialized beside him in the small cockpit. He looked cramped and uncomfortable in the narrow extra seat and he was brushing away a speck on his white-suited knee. "I have some further news for you."

"As good as the last?"

"In the same vein at any rate."

"The Eastern Alliance has gone ahead and launched its missiles, right?"

John nodded in confirmation. "Exactly. So you haven't any time to lose in getting help."

"I'll make it, won't I?"

"Why ask me?"

"I figure any guy who can flit through time and space the way you do ought to be able to peek into the future, too."

"I don't go in for cheap fortunetelling tricks, the way your gawky lady friend does."

"Don't go making cracks about Sue, because she . . . Heck, John, I've got no time to argue with you."

"You haven't, no." He vanished once more.

Commander Adama picked up the talkmike. "Go ahead."

Behind him on the bridge Colonel Tigh stood, watching him anxiously.

"We have Viper Four coming in on the comline, sir," came a voice out of the speaker.

"I know. Feed it to the bridge quickly. Come in, Viper Four."

A crackling, frying sound spilled out of the speaker.

That was followed by Lieutenant Starbuck's voice. "Commander? This is Viper Four calling."

"I read you, Lieutenant. Go ahead."

"Apollo's okay, by the way. In case you were wondering."

"I was."

"I'm in jim dandy shape, too. We'll go into all that later. Right now, though, we got us an emergency situation," he said, talking rapidly. "You folks are close enough to Terra to pick up what's going on down here, aren't you?"

"We're close, but what do you—"

"Haven't time to go into all the details," Starbuck cut in. "The upshot is that any micron you should be picking up one whole stewpot of flying objects angling across the planet."

Tigh had moved to a scanner screen. "We're picking up rising missiles now," he said. "Clearing the planet's atmosphere and entering the ionosphere."

"That's them," said Starbuck.

"Readout shows them to be armed devices of some primitive nuclear kind."

"Primitive or not," said Starbuck, "they're plenty sophisticated enough to wipe out a good chunk of Terra. We've got to destroy those missiles, Skipper, before these nitwits down here end up destroying each other."

"Can do," said Adama.

"Okay," said the lieutenant. "I'm heading your way. See you soon."

"Battlestations," announced the commander. "Standby force shields. Maximum laser power."

Apollo made his way up to the podium. He planted himself between the President and the general.

Addressing the assembled members, he said, "Gentlemen, forgive my intruding into this domestic squabble, but I was sent here to give you some information and . . . I intend to do just that."

The President frowned at the Chairman. "Colonel Watts has been under severe strain of late," he said. "In fact, he's an escapee from a mental institution whereat—"

"I'm not Colonel Watts," corrected Apollo. "And the place I escaped from is a detention station for people who don't agree with you, President Arends. The fact that you dumped me, General Farris and his daughter there we'll get to later. Right now there are more important—"

"This man is obviously suffering from mental problems, Mr. Chairman," said the President. "I suggest we summon—"

"This is the man I asked to bring here," said General Farris. "I think he should be heard."

"In light of what President Arends has told us about the new treaty," said the Chairman, "do you, General, still wish to pursue this?"

Before the general could respond Apollo said, "That treaty isn't worth one heck of a lot. The Eastern Alliance is about to launch an attack on you, treaty or no treaty. That's—"

There were many angry shouts from throughout the assembly hall now. Men and women were jumping to their feet, waving fists.

"Order," said the Chairman, banging his gavel. "Order, please."

The President spread his hands wide. "Colonel Watts is obviously suffering from delusions of—"

A loud hooting siren commenced sounding. A section of the wall behind the dais slid back to reveal a large videoscreen.

"Red Emergency," said a voice from speakers dangling overhead. "Red Emergency!"

On the screen showed a hazy patch of sky. The missiles knifing across it looked like dark predatory birds.

"The Eastern Alliance has launched a missile attack against us," said the voice out of the speakers.

General Farris sighed. "So much for your treaty, Mr. President."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Commander Adama strode from scanner to scanner. "Fire again," he ordered.

More laser beams went sizzling down from the *Galactica* toward the arcing missiles. More explosions followed.

Tigh was chuckling. "We've got them just about wiped out," he said. "The initial wave of missiles as well as the retaliatory wave from the other side."

"Yes, we've been quite successful."

On the nearest screen to the commander a laser beam went crackling toward a missile. It connected with a warhead; there was an immense sparkling and then a throbbing explosion.

"Very satisfactory," murmured Adama as he turned his back on the screen.

"We're getting a chain reaction! Missiles destroying each other," said Colonel Tigh, elated. "Looks like we've stopped a war, sir."

"And saved millions of lives," added Adama.

"That, too, of course. But I was just wondering . . . we aren't even sure who's fighting who down there. Which side is in the right, which is in the wrong."

"I don't think the conflict is that cut and dried, Colonel," said Adama. "No war ever is. I imagine, though, that one of the sides must be the Eastern Alliance. I'll wager they launched the first strike."

"Someday, though, I'm going to want more details."

"I'm sure my son and Lieutenant Starbuck will provide you with all you'll want to know."

"I'll make it a point to see they do," said Colonel Tigh.

Lieutenant Starbuck was sitting back in his seat, hands locked behind his head, gazing up through the clear roof of his cockpit. "Zow, some show!" he observed, exhaling smoke. "Too bad my pal Will/F isn't up here to see it. He'd say it was dang interesting."

Far above him, out in the ionosphere, missiles were exploding and making the most enormous display of fireworks he'd ever seen.

"Viper Four," came a familiar voice, "Viper Four, please come in."

Starbuck straightened up, smoothed his hair and responded, "Viper Four here, sir."

"This is Commander Adama, Lieutenant."

"You folks did one heck of a . . . um . . . you did a commendable job, sir."

"We did," said the commander. "Are you all right, Starbuck?"

"I'm fine, since those things are going off beyond the atmosphere and I'm still snug within it."

Adama asked, "When will Apollo be returning to the battlestar?"

"His mission's finished, so I guess any time now."

"His mission was to trail that destroyer."

"Oh, that mission? Well, you see, sir, there was another mission that sort of took . . . He'll explain it all to you when he gets home. You bet."

"I trust he will."

President Arends sat slumped in his chair upon the dais, long arms dangling straight at his sides. "I don't quite understand all this," he said in a faraway voice.

"The Eastern Alliance says they're ready to sign a new treaty," said General Farris, holding the memo up to him again. "They were, so I've been informed by my intelligence people, very impressed by how we took out their missiles."

"But we didn't do a blessed thing except launch our own missiles back at—"

"Right, the *Galactica* took care of all the missiles," said Apollo, who was sitting on the edge of the chair that Moore had long since vacated.

"*Galactica*?" The President's voice appeared to be dimming.

"You never allowed me to introduce Captain Apollo," said Farris.

"He really isn't Colonel Charlie Watts?"

"No, he's from the Battlestar *Galactica*, a ship from a world and a star system far from our own."

Arends looked over at Apollo. "How did this battlestar manage to . . . do what it did to those missiles, Captain?"

"Let's just say we're from a civilization more advanced, technologically, than yours," answered Apollo. "Simple missiles such as these present not much of a chall—"

"Simple? Why, they're highly sophisticated *and* costly. The defense budget is . . . ah, but I guess I shouldn't interrupt you," apologized the President. "You were saying?"

"Handling those missiles wasn't tough for the battlestar," said Apollo, rising. "I might also point out that we can always make a return trip, in case more trouble starts here on Terra."

"I don't think," put in General Farris, "that the Eastern Alliance is going to be making any trouble for a while. They were truly impressed by what went on. Of course, they think we're responsible, but I think we'll let them go on thinking that."

"Just so you don't start trouble for them," cautioned Apollo.

President Arends was watching him. "Why did you people take an interest in our problems at all, Captain?"

"There are things I'm not exactly permitted to tell you," he answered. "Even our civilization has its military secrets. Maybe in time our Council will choose to open relations. In the meantime . . . well, we have a journey to complete."

"You intend to leave?" asked the general.

"I have to, yes. If you can arrange transportation back to my ship I'd—"

"I'll drive you," offered Brenda, who'd been sitting quietly at the other side of the podium.

"Fine. Let's go, then."

The President, not getting up, held out his hand. "Thank you, Captain Apollo. "You've opened my eyes to a great many things."

"I know General Farris will make darn sure they stay open," said Apollo.

Brenda pulled her vehicle off the road, parking under a stand of trees. "This is just about where I picked you up originally," she said. "Seems like an awful long time ago."

"It does," agreed Apollo.

"Can you tell me something?"

"I can try."

"Is Charlie alive?"

"Yes, he is."

"Where?"

"He was being held on Luna One," answered Apollo. "Now that the war's over, he'll be coming home to Terra."

"I'm glad," she said quietly.

"You don't sound . . . enthusiastic."

"You look like Charlie," Brenda told him, "but . . . in most ways you're not like him at all. Charlie's handsome and charming, but . . . he's not a very caring, supportive sort of man. Even though he and I were . . . What I'm getting at is that I wasn't the only woman in his life and I probably won't ever be. Even if he comes back safe and sound and we get married. I loved him enough to put up with all these . . . quirks. Now, though, having known you for a while, I . . ."

"Don't forget I've been on my best behavior," said Apollo.

"Even so."

"Well, listen. It's one heck of a big universe and you're a fine woman. So, if Charlie can't live up to your standards, Find someone else."

She nodded, then leaned and kissed him on the cheek. "Thanks, Apollo. Good luck."

He opened the door and stepped out of her landcar. "You'll do just fine," he said, stepping back from it.

"Sure," she said. "Sure." She started the car and, without looking at him again, drove away.

The viper sat in the clearing where he'd left it.

Leaning against the broad trunk of a nearby tree was John.

"We did quite a nice job," he said to Apollo.

"Very impressive," said Apollo, walking to his ship. "I think we managed to scare all the sides involved in this fracas."

"For now," said John, brushing a bit of fallen leaf off his elbow. "You'll find that even the most impressive lessons have to be reinforced now and again."

Apollo opened the hatch. "I suppose I'll be seeing you again, John?"

"I wouldn't be at all surprised."

"One thing," requested Apollo, "before you go vanishing again. A question I'd like answered."

"That's not allowed."

Apollo pointed at him. "Look, John old buddy, you have to do this," he said. "I mean, I risked my neck along with Starbuck's and the entire fleet's. You owe me a favor."

John looked away, head cocked as though listening. Turning again toward Apollo he said, "Very well. Ask."

"Is this Earth?"

"No, it isn't," answered John. "Your journey is not over."

Apollo let out the breath he'd been holding. "Thanks," he said to John.

But the man in the white suit was no longer in the clearing.

Apollo climbed into his ship.